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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

The University of Auckland  
2010

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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.

## Acknowledgements

This thesis began as a transitory and somewhat diverting thought as I sat through a graduation ceremony. Once articulated it acquired a life of its own.

Such an idea would not have found form without the enthusiasm and encouragement of my supervisor Dr. Erin Griffey whose early lectures first sparked the passion. Erin allowed me to take an idea and run with it – a license for which I am truly grateful. Dr. Elizabeth Rankin graciously took on the role of second supervisor and with it the task of assessing the text. Her intellectual rigour, her meticulous reading, her long experience and her endless courtesy helped eliminate the discrepancy between what I knew and took for granted and what needed to be academically supported.

Since the subject of this thesis ranges through the disciplines of art history and theology some added oversight was necessary. I owe a deep debt of gratitude to my advisor Rev. Dr. Mervyn Duffy S.M. priest, theologian and friend. Merv has guided the process, changed heresy into acceptable theology and brought reason to chaos. I am grateful for his generous gift of time, his patience, his countless valuable insights, but above all for his contagious delight in art and the possibilities it presents to explain theology.

I would like also to record my thanks to Inie Kroef and Rev Peter Janssen for their assistance with translation and to the librarians of the University of Auckland Fine Arts Library, the Colin Library, Good Shepherd College, Auckland, the University of Cambridge Library, the Fitzwilliam Reading Room, the Witt Library at the Courtauld Institute, the Warburg Library and photographic archive, the Victoria and Albert Library, the Rijksmuseum Research Library and to the staff of the print rooms at the Fitzwilliam Museum, the British Museum, Auckland Art Gallery and the National Museum of New Zealand, Te Papa Tongarewa.

Special thanks must go to my family. My husband Ian, a man learned in the law, has had to digest the idiosyncrasies of art historical discourse. He has accompanied me unflinchingly through endless galleries throughout Europe and endured innumerable hours when I have been otherwise occupied. To Clare and Andy, John and Ashley, Andrew and Wendy, Mary Elizabeth and Andrew, and Lucy who have followed my path with interest, enthusiasm and above all with an unfailing belief that it could be done, thank you for your patience and love. Each has contributed something, but all have done something more important, they have believed in the project and encouraged my devotion to it.

Finally to my wider family and friends, I am forever appreciative of those who had the courage to enquire how work was progressing and the time to listen to the answer.

This thesis evolved within the working life of a family. It has been enriched by the comings and goings of our grand-children Mary Sophia and Joseph, Timothy and Saskia, Jessica, George and Joseph. I love you all.

The end of a journey is simply a new beginning.

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earchText=rembrandt+etchings&fromDate=&fromadbc=ad&toDate=&toadbc=ad&x=11&y=10

- Figure 269. Rembrandt, *The Flight into Egypt* (etching, 93 x 144 mm) 1654, British Museum, London. Image source: British Museum, [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search\\_the\\_collection\\_database/search\\_results.aspx?orig=%2Fresearch%2Fsearch\\_the\\_collection\\_database.aspx&searchText=rembrandt+etchings&fromDate=&fromadbc=ad&toDate=&toadbc=ad&x=11&y=10](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database/search_results.aspx?orig=%2Fresearch%2Fsearch_the_collection_database.aspx&searchText=rembrandt+etchings&fromDate=&fromadbc=ad&toDate=&toadbc=ad&x=11&y=10)
- Figure 270. Rembrandt, *Christ Disputing with the Doctors in the Temple* (etching and drypoint, 96 x 114 mm) 1654, British Museum, London. Image source: British Museum, [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search\\_the\\_collection\\_database/search\\_results.aspx?orig=%2Fresearch%2Fsearch\\_the\\_collection\\_database.aspx&searchText=rembrandt+etchings&fromDate=&fromadbc=ad&toDate=&toadbc=ad&x=11&y=10](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database/search_results.aspx?orig=%2Fresearch%2Fsearch_the_collection_database.aspx&searchText=rembrandt+etchings&fromDate=&fromadbc=ad&toDate=&toadbc=ad&x=11&y=10)
- Figure 271. Rembrandt, *Christ and his Parents Returning from the Temple* (etching, 94 x 145 mm) 1654, British Museum, London. Image source: British Museum, [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search\\_the\\_collection\\_database/search\\_results.aspx?orig=%2Fresearch%2Fsearch\\_the\\_collection\\_database.aspx&searchText=rembrandt+etchings&fromDate=&fromadbc=ad&toDate=&toadbc=ad&x=11&y=10](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database/search_results.aspx?orig=%2Fresearch%2Fsearch_the_collection_database.aspx&searchText=rembrandt+etchings&fromDate=&fromadbc=ad&toDate=&toadbc=ad&x=11&y=10)
- Figure 272. Andrea Mantegna, *Virgin and Child* (engraving, 250 x 210 mm) 1490, British Museum, London. Image source: Gary Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book* (New York: Abrams, 2006): 30.
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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>
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- Figure 282. Unknown artist, *Scenes from the Life of the Virgin, The Lamentation at the Tomb* (detail) (wood, canvas, gesso) c.1250-60, Monastery of St. Catherine. Image source: Valeria Manfredi de Fabianis, ed. *The Treasures of the Monastery of Saint Catherine* (Vercelli, Italy: White Star Publishers, 2006): 194.
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## Thesis Introduction

In his extensive historiography on the life and work of Rembrandt van Rijn, *Rembrandt's Eyes* (1999), Simon Schama sums up the all but universal description of Rembrandt as a 'Protestant' artist. He credits Rembrandt with having finally created what "the preachers said was impossible: Protestant Icons."<sup>1</sup> Schama's conclusion, I will argue, is debatable. The link he makes, however, is important. In tying the idea of Protestantism to the essentially Catholic/Orthodox term 'icon' (used in its truest form to denote a sacred painting), he illustrates succinctly the dependence of Protestant religious art on its Catholic roots. How easily these can be separated – if at all – is the central question for this thesis.

The designation of Rembrandt as a 'Protestant artist' has, since the early nineteenth century, both defined and instructed the study of Rembrandt's biblical paintings, etchings and drawings. Scholars have typically used the term 'Protestant' in generic terms to refer to both Rembrandt's work and his confessional identity. 'Protestant' as a general term however, is used to describe the churches that were formed after the break from Rome and through the process of the Reformation. There were in Rembrandt's day, many protesting churches, among which were the Lutherans, Calvinists, Mennonites, Remonstrants, Counter-Remonstrants and Arminians.<sup>2</sup>

There is considerable confusion in the literature about Rembrandt's place within this spectrum. S.A.C. Dudok van Heel suggests that Rembrandt was a Remonstrant, while Jakob Rosenberg is more impressed by his Mennonite contacts.<sup>3</sup> Rembrandt is generally associated with the Reformed tradition, because it was from the Reformed Church that he was married, his children were baptised and buried and he himself was

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes* (London: Penguin, 1999): 479. Catharine Randall has used the particular words as a subject for a critical essay "Rembrandt's Protestant Icons", *Books and Culture* 7.2 (2001): 32.

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the religions of Post-Reformation Europe see Ninian Smart, *The World's Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) especially Part Two, Chapter 14. For the Impact of Post-Reformation theology on the visual culture of the age see William A. Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> See S.A.C. Dudok van Heel, *De Jonghe Rembrandt onder tijdgenoten: godsdienst en schilderkunst in Leiden en Amsterdam* (Rotterdam: Veenman Publishers, 2006). Jakob Rosenberg, *Rembrandt: Life and Work* (London: Phaidon, 1968): 182-3. D.M. Field suggests that Rembrandt was closest in sympathy to the more moderate wing of the Mennonites, Field, *Rembrandt* (London: Regency House Publishing, 2007): 331. Trewin Copplestone argues also for Rembrandt's affinity with the thoughts and preaching of the Mennonites. See Copplestone, *Understanding Rembrandt* (London: Trewin Copplestone Publishing, 1976): 22-23.



finally buried.<sup>4</sup> In view of the lack of clarity regarding Rembrandt's religious inclination I shall continue to use the generic term 'Protestant'.

Where religious determination becomes a marker in the analysis of Rembrandt's biblical histories he is labelled 'Protestant' and his works are viewed as displaying a particularly Protestant approach in both style and content. The privileging of such a definition, I suggest, has led to a distortion in the study of Rembrandt's New Testament works in favour of those which can be seen to support such a bias.

All but absent from the literature surrounding Rembrandt's artistic enterprise is a sustained academic analysis of those works where Rembrandt includes the Virgin Mary, either as a subject in her own right or as a supporting figure within a broader context. With the exception of short descriptive studies of particular works, scholars have, in the main, avoided – or perhaps disregarded – the presence of the Virgin Mary in Rembrandt's New Testament *oeuvre*.<sup>5</sup> Her presence represents a body of work which lies uncomfortably within, and in some places definitively outside, the designation of Rembrandt as a Protestant artist.

Some writers have noted the paradoxical presence of works which picture the Virgin Mary in representations that appear to be specifically 'Catholic' or made for a 'Catholic market'.<sup>6</sup> This applies almost solely to Rembrandt's print production. An

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<sup>4</sup> For the official records see Walter L. Strauss and Marjon van der Meulen, *The Rembrandt Documents* (Abaris Books: New York, 1979).

The fact that these events took place within a Reformed church is not as definitive as might be thought. This was a civic necessity since, as will be seen, the Catholic Church, for example, had been deprived of civic status. The Reformed churches themselves were many and varied all requiring their own particular modes of affiliation. Different threads of Reformed theology and church order were entangled until the Synod of Dort (1618-19). The Canons of Dort became one of the doctrinal foundations of the Dutch Reformed Church. See John Bowker, "The Dutch Reformed Church" in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, 1997. <http://www.encyclopedia.com> accessed 24/03/2009.

In his review of the Synod of Dort, Herbert D. Foster shows that the Remonstrants, the Counter-Remonstrants and the Dutch Reformed Church all displayed variations on the teaching of Calvin. All were Calvinists, but of different schools; the Remonstrants were liberal and progressive, the Counter-Remonstrants conservative, scholastic and rigid. See Foster, "Liberal Calvinism: The Remonstrants at the Synod of Dort in 1618", *Harvard Theological Review* 16.1 (1923): 36.

<sup>5</sup> Examples of such short inclusions can be seen for example in exhibition catalogues such as Julia Lloyd Williams, ed. *Rembrandt's Women* (London: Prestel, 2001): 180, 200, 201.

<sup>6</sup> Most descriptions of particular works where the Virgin takes pre-eminence in a scene not explicable within a Protestant context are covered in this fashion. See for example Eva Ornstein-Van Slooten and Marijke Holtrop, eds. *The Rembrandt House: A Catalogue of Rembrandt Etchings* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2003): 47 and Gary Schwartz, ed. *The Complete Etchings of Rembrandt Reproduced in Original Size* (New York: Dover Publications, 1994): B61. Also Anat Gilboa, *Images of the Feminine in Rembrandt's Work*, (Delft: Eburon, 2003): 59-60.

On the subject of Rembrandt's appeal to particular markets, Svetlana Alpers writes at length about Rembrandt's marketing abilities. She speaks of Rembrandt as an 'entrepreneur of sorts' and of his obsession with the intricacies of the market system. He chose, she said, to make art for the new markets. Although she does not deal directly with any 'Catholic subjects', she does note that it was a

appeal to a particular market may explain the reason for making such a print; it does not, however, address the issue of Rembrandt's choice of iconography. There is little attempt within the literature to understand the possibilities, the inspiration, the visual history or the contemporary philosophy, which might lie behind the choice of these subjects.

This body of work cannot be ignored. Rembrandt's 'Marian' works provide one of the central themes in his New Testament history portfolio. A careful study of these images shows that the often disquieting presence of the Virgin inhabits a considerable proportion of such works. Anat Gilboa devotes a chapter in her *Images of the Feminine in Rembrandt's Work* (2003) to this cause. She states that Mary is represented in about eighteen paintings, twenty-nine etchings and about a hundred drawings.<sup>7</sup> Gary Schwartz provides a graph of the numbers and dates of various works in all media which have as their subject episodes from the life of the Holy Family. While expressing the importance of that subject as a theme and the Virgin as its central character, Schwartz's statistics focus on Christ's infancy and do not include Mary's presence in works such as *Virgin and Child in the Clouds* (1641) or in scenes

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biblically inspired print *Christ Preaching* which was given the name 'The Hundred Guilder Print' because that is the price Rembrandt paid for it at a sale. He was, she says, trying to manipulate the market by buying back his own work in order to increase its rarity and thus its value on the open market. Alpers, *Rembrandt's Enterprise: The Studio and the Market* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988): 104. Although various states exist for some of these works there is little information about print runs. Since two of the overtly Marian themes are found in only one state it might suggest that production was limited and that Rembrandt's intentions could have been more personal. The *Death of the Virgin*, perhaps a more familiar and trans-confessional topic, was made in three states. The *Virgin with Child in the Clouds* was made in only one state as was the *Virgin with the Instruments of the Passion*. The *Virgin and Child with Cat and Snake* was made in two states. For an overview of the politics of print publishing in the Dutch Republic see Nadine Orenstein, "Prints and the Politics of the Publisher: The Case of Hendrick Hondius", *Simiolus* 23.4 (1995): 240-250.

<sup>7</sup> Gilboa, *Images of the Feminine*, 50.

Such calculations are inevitably contestable since questions of attribution continue to move the boundaries of authenticity and acceptability. By my own calculations based on Otto Benesch, *The Drawings of Rembrandt: First Complete Edition in Six Volumes* (London: Phaidon, 1955); Seymour Slive, *Drawings of Rembrandt*, Vols. 1-2, (New York: Dover Publications, 1975); Gary Schwartz, *The Complete Etchings of Rembrandt Reproduced in Original Size*; an earlier but important catalogue of the paintings: A. Bredius revised by H. Gerson, *Rembrandt, The Complete Edition of the Paintings*, 3<sup>rd</sup>. ed. (London: Phaidon, 1969); and Ernst van der Wetering et al. *Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, Vols. 1-3 (London, The Hague, Boston: Rembrandt Research Project, 1982-2006), the Virgin appears in thirty-two etchings, twenty-eight paintings, and thirty-three drawings. Again, a measure of the difficulty surrounding the ascription of works to Rembrandt himself can be seen in a graph provided by Gary Schwartz. The total number of paintings ascribed to Rembrandt has varied from 588 (Smith – 1836) to as high as 714 (Valentiner – 1923) and more recently to 315 (Slatkes – 1992); see Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book* (New York: Abrams, 2006): 14-15.

associated with the Passion and Death of Christ, the Lamentation or the *Mater Dolorosa*.<sup>8</sup>

A recently published book by Shelley Perlove and Larry Silver provides a more detailed analysis of some of Rembrandt's Marian images. These are included within a broad history of works which depict the infancy narrative of Christ. Despite the recognition of their 'Catholic' subject, there is a consistent effort to show how Rembrandt has manipulated the content to respond to a Protestant ethic. To date this text provides the most detailed examination of such works and will be referred to in later analyses.<sup>9</sup>

An earlier commentator, Willem A. Visser 't Hooft (1900-1985), writing in the first half of the twentieth century, realised the centrality of the Virgin Mary as a separate theme in Rembrandt's New Testament *oeuvre*. He devoted a chapter in his text – *Rembrandts Weg Zum Evangelium* (1960) (Rembrandt and the Gospel) – to a short study of these works. As an ordained minister of the Netherlands Reformed Church, he was better placed than most to assess the importance of such iconography.<sup>10</sup> He refutes suggestions that Rembrandt's love of the figure of the Virgin might spring from Mennonite ideas towards the Mother of God.<sup>11</sup> He suggests that, rather than looking towards any Catholic influence in Rembrandt's choice of subject, Rembrandt was responding to a general acceptance of the Virgin Mary within the Reformed Church. This, he suggests, is based on both Luther and Calvin's respect for the words of Mary's hymn of praise the *Magnificat*.<sup>12</sup> Such views, which appear to

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<sup>8</sup> Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book*, 319-335. For an assessment of the importance of religious art in general, the distribution of religious art in both Reformed and Catholic homes and in particular the themes favoured by various denominations in the Amsterdam of Rembrandt's day see John Michael Montias "Works of Art in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam: An Analysis of Subjects and Attributions" in David Freedberg and Jan de Vries, eds. *Art in History: History in Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987): 331-372. See also John Michael Montias, *Art at Auction in 17<sup>th</sup> Century Amsterdam* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> Shelley Perlove and Larry Silver, *Rembrandt's Faith: Church and Temple in the Dutch Golden Age* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Willem Adolph Visser 't Hooft, *Rembrandts Weg Zum Evangelium*, trans. K. Gregor Smith (New York: Meridian, 1960): 42-48.

<sup>11</sup> This suggestion was made by Hans Martin Rotermund in his essay *Rembrandt und die religiösen Laienbewegungen in den Niederlanden seiner Zeit* quoted in Visser 't Hooft, 47.

<sup>12</sup> The *Magnificat* was the hymn of praise made by the Virgin Mary in response to Elizabeth's salutation at the Visitation. For Luther and Calvin's particular devotion to the *Magnificat*, see Susan C. Karant-Nunn and Merry Weisner-Hanks, *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Beth Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary: Changing Images of the Virgin in Lutheran Sermons of the Sixteenth-Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) and Thomas A. O'Meara *Mary in Catholic and Protestant Theology* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966).

be in the nature of comment rather than the result of substantiated research, have continued to colour Rembrandt scholarship.

This thesis hopes to redress the balance by examining the body of Rembrandt's work that takes the Virgin Mary as a subject in her own right or includes her as a subsidiary figure in his New Testament biblical histories. It places a particular emphasis on the theology which underpins Rembrandt's approach to his subject. It will show that, far from a broad inclusion of Mary as a subject dependent on the artistic tradition and safely included in Rembrandt's *oeuvre* as either picturesque and non-challenging biblical studies or as eccentricities, his 'Marian' works respond to the prevailing confessional dilemmas of his time. The manner of this response is sometimes covertly, often overtly, Catholic. Even such works as can safely be included within the artistic restrictions of a Calvinist society, as biblical exemplars of the right and proper manner of living the Christian life, can be shown to include elements that subversively respond to Catholic belief.

Rembrandt's Marian paintings can be viewed, with the exception of his *The Virgin of Sorrows* (1661) and inclusions of the Virgin as a bystander in the events of the passion and death of Christ, from within the familiar and superficially-safe heading of episodes from the 'infancy narrative of Christ'. Because of the nature of these single painted works which responded readily to the biblical text and to the contemporary mores of a society which had at its heart the sanctity of the family unit, these are most likely to have been made for sale on the open market or possibly for a commission.<sup>13</sup> His drawings range across a myriad of Marian topics. The spontaneity of the artistic response and the fragile nature of the medium itself suggest that these sketches could always be excused as examples of transitory ideas, since few found their way into a more solid form either as etchings or painted works. These works, however, have particular importance for they provide revealing clues about Rembrandt's approach to

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<sup>13</sup> For example: the inventory of Johannes de Renialme shows that he was in possession of two paintings of 'Mary and Joseph by Rembrandt van Rijn'. These works have been cautiously identified as *The Holy Family with Angels* 1645 (The Hermitage) and *The Holy Family with Painted Frame and Curtain* c.1646 (Kassel, Gemäldegalerie). De Renialme was an important art dealer, a Catholic, who appeared in the 1640s to have succeeded Hendrick Uylenburgh as Rembrandt's dealer. Johannes de Renialme's estate was auctioned on 3 September 1657. See Gary Schwartz, *Rembrandt: His Life, His Paintings* (New York: Viking, 1984): 233, 278. The painting *The Holy Family* c.1633-35 was thought to have been in the collection of Marten Soolmans (1613-1641) and his wife Oopjen Coppit (1611-1689) members of the Reformed Church for whom Rembrandt had made pendant portraits probably for the occasion of their wedding (Williams, *Rembrandt's Women*, 102).

Marian iconography, indicating, as Otto Benesch (1896-1964) observes, “the work of an artist whose ideas are in a constant state of inner development.”<sup>14</sup>

Rembrandt saves his most controversial Marian ideas for the print medium. His *Death of the Virgin* (1639), his *Virgin and Child in the Clouds* (1641), his *Virgin and Child with the Cat and Snake* (1654) and his *Virgin with the Instruments of the Passion* (c.1652) all address subjects which lie within the world of Catholic belief and private devotion. His choice of the medium of etching, the medium most capable of wide dissemination, seems unlikely to be anything other than deliberate. Volker Manuth notes that one of the remarkable features of Rembrandt’s work is the absorption of the Catholic pictorial tradition, of which he appeared able to make use without upsetting potential Protestant customers.<sup>15</sup> He notes also that examples of such religiously controversial subjects are found most often in his drawings and etchings.<sup>16</sup>

The issue of Rembrandt’s adoption of Marian motifs and histories in particular works within his *oeuvre* and their relationship to his presumed Protestant status is central to this thesis. It raises questions about what critics mean when they describe Rembrandt as a ‘Protestant’ artist and when this description assumed importance within Rembrandt literature. It questions the validity of imposing a designation which did not apply to the artist and his work in his own time but reflects ideas which arose in the course of nineteenth and twentieth-century political, historical and art historical debate. It examines the effect this designation has had on an overall assessment of Rembrandt’s biblical *oeuvre*.

## Thesis structure

The focus of this thesis is to re-examine an established bias which predicates almost all analysis of Rembrandt’s religious *oeuvre*: Rembrandt was a ‘Protestant’ painter, a premise which, it is said, can be justified by a study of his life and his artistic output. The thesis challenges this double presumption. It falls easily into two separate sections. The first section, divided into four chapters, provides the contextual background. A second section concentrates on a detailed analysis of six of

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<sup>14</sup> Benesch, *The Drawings of Rembrandt*, Vol. 1, xii.

<sup>15</sup> Volker Manuth, “Are you a Mennonite, Papist, Arminian or Beggar? Art, Religion and Rembrandt” in Ernst van der Wetering, *Quest of a Genius* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2006): 70.

<sup>16</sup> Manuth, 70.

Rembrandt's Marian works in order to show that religious issues were not as clear-cut as has been previously thought. Rembrandt was both aware of and actively involved in the dissemination of art works which can clearly be labelled as 'Catholic' in both subject matter and underlying theological discourse.

Chapter One begins by studying the evolution of the description of Rembrandt as a Protestant artist and asks an initial question – what do writers mean when they attach this description to Rembrandt's name? Two associated questions follow. Is there a recognisable 'Protestant' art form? And, if so, what does this art look like? It examines the history of art criticism in the Dutch Republic and surveys the mores that governed the appreciation of art in Rembrandt's time. It assesses the ideologies that led to a growing interest in the religious beliefs of an artist as a means of understanding and appreciating the conditions that influenced his art. Finally it scrutinizes the views of various writers who seek to show that Rembrandt created a type of art that was different enough from that of his peers and the art tradition in which he was educated to justify his designation as a 'Protestant artist'.

Chapter Two examines the history of religious art in the Dutch Republic after the Reformation, a period which initiated a momentous change in the production of art and the way it was accessed by the public.<sup>17</sup> The proscriptions and restrictions which both Luther and later Calvin inflicted on the artistic tradition gave birth to a form of art based not on the centrality of the biblical text but on the natural world, which provided the stage on which the individual human being lived his or her life. New genres emerged, which depicted this natural world, the earth, the seas and their bounty or illustrated events which had previously been confined to the domestic space of the home. It visualised also those worldly gifts which a growing national prosperity

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<sup>17</sup> For an assessment of art in general and religious art in particular following the life and preaching of Martin Luther and John Calvin see Christopher Richard Joby, *Calvinism and the Arts: A Reassessment* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007); Carlos M. Eire, *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Bernard Cottret, trans. M. Wallace McDonald, *Calvin: A Biography* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995); Reindert L. Falkenburg "Calvinism and the Emergence of a Dutch Seventeenth-Century Landscape Art – A Critical Evaluation", in Paul Corby Finney, ed. *Seeing Beyond the Word* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1999): 343-368; James R. Tanis "Netherlandish Reformed Tradition in the Graphic Arts, 1550-1630", in Paul Corby Finney, ed. *Seeing Beyond the Word*, 369-398; Ilja M. Veldman, "Protestantism and the Arts: Sixteenth-and Seventeenth-Century Netherlands" in Paul Corby Finney, ed. *Seeing Beyond the Word*, 397-420; Beth Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary: Changing Images of the Virgin Mary in Lutheran Sermons of the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches* (London: Fontana, 1991); for an earlier study of the spiritual conflicts in seventeenth-century Holland see W. R. Valentiner, *Rembrandt and Spinoza* (London: Phaidon, 1957).

bestowed on the population. It became what Mariët Westermann describes as a ‘worldly art’.<sup>18</sup>

With the attraction to the new genre of naturalism – still-lives, landscapes and genre pieces, the output of religious art was diminished and its focus changed. It did not, however, cease to exist. Earlier writers such as Otto Benesch, saw the demise of the ‘devotional picture’. It was replaced, he says, by historical paintings illustrating biblical episodes. Recent scholarship shows that that was not the case.<sup>19</sup> Rembrandt was not alone in his depictions of biblical histories nor was he alone in his depictions of subjects which might easily fit the description of ‘devotional pictures’.<sup>20</sup>

Chapter Three analyses Rembrandt’s life and his own visual tradition. It looks at what is known about Rembrandt’s history and explores briefly the likely influences on his religious art: his family, his teachers and the art and prints that were available to him and which might have had a direct influence on the subject and content of some of his work. It looks at the type of Bible he might have owned; the Bible was obviously a significant text for him since it was the only book known to have been in his ownership both at his insolvency (1656) and in the final inventory after his death (1669).<sup>21</sup> This chapter also examines possible sources for apocryphal ideas which provided subjects for some of his art.<sup>22</sup> Finally, it includes a brief description of the

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<sup>18</sup> This forms the title of Westermann’s study of art in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic: Mariët Westermann, *A Worldly Art: The Dutch Republic 1585-1718* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004). For a wide-ranging analysis of the culture in the Dutch Republic in the age of Rembrandt see Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches* (1987).

<sup>19</sup> Otto Benesch, *Rembrandt* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990): 55. Also Otto Benesch, *The Drawings of Rembrandt* (London: Phaidon, 1955). For other earlier views on the place of religious art in Rembrandt’s *oeuvre* see also Jakob Rosenberg, *Rembrandt* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1948); Jakob Rosenberg, *Rembrandt, Life and Work* (London: Phaidon, 1968); William A. Visser ‘t Hooft, *Rembrandt and the Gospels* (New York: Meridian, 1960).

<sup>20</sup> See in particular Xander van Eck, *Clandestine Splendor: Paintings for the Catholic Church in the Dutch Republic* (Waanders: Zwolle, 2007); Daniel W. Hardy, “Calvinism and the Visual Arts: A Theological Introduction”, in Paul Corby Finney, ed. *Seeing Beyond the Word*, 1-16; Mia M. Mochizuki, “At Home with the Ten Commandments: Domestic Text Paintings in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam” in A. Golahny, M.M. Mochizuki and L. Vergara, eds. *In His Milieu: Essays on Netherlandish Art in Memory of John Michael Montias* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006): 287-300; Robert Baldwin, “Artistic Genius, Social Anxiety and the Marketed Calvinist Image”, in Shelley Perlove, ed. *Impressions of Faith: Rembrandt’s Biblical Etchings* (Dearborn: University of Michigan Press, 1989): 22-34; Volker Manuth, “Denomination and Iconography: Choice of Subject Matter in the Biblical Painting of the Rembrandt Circle, *Simiolus*, 22 (1993): 235-241. Xander van Eck, “Clandestine Catholic Churches as Patrons of Dutch Caravaggesque Painting, *Simiolus* 22.1 (1993): 217

<sup>21</sup> Rembrandt’s inventory made between 25-26 July 1656 is found in the *Rembrandt Documents*, 349-387.

<sup>22</sup> For a particular study of the types of Bible available in seventeenth-century Holland see M. Lamberigts and A. A. Den Hollander *Lay Bibles in Europe 1450-1800* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2006). An essential source of inspiration for episodes from the Apocryphal Gospels and one available to and used by artists for many centuries is Jacobus de Voragine, trans. William Grainger

types of religious traditions Rembrandt is known to have had some interest in, namely Judaism and the Mennonism, and their possible influence on his religious work.<sup>23</sup>

Chapter Four examines the presence of the Virgin Mary in Rembrandt's art. It looks at Rembrandt's exploration of general themes in the life of the Virgin and particularly the controversial subjects, which will be discussed in detail in Section Two. These themes are related to the chronological pattern of Rembrandt's life in order to ascertain whether distinct subject patterns can be shown to cluster around certain events in Rembrandt's own life.

Section Two of this thesis is devoted to an examination of six works from Rembrandt's Marian *oeuvre*. It is dependent on a theological interpretation of the iconography, which takes the study beyond the usual limits of style, context, chronology or physical examination and assesses them in the light of contemporary religious teaching. A designation of 'Protestant' or 'Catholic' does not allow for the subtleties of internecine conflict or a personal accommodation of religious sentiment. Such an approach, it is hoped, will broaden the understanding of this particular grouping of Rembrandt's New Testament art and place it within the religious context of his day and within the personal context of his own life. Recent research has shown that confessional loyalties and religious boundaries are more complex than has previously been thought.<sup>24</sup>

The six case studies are divided into two loose categories. The first category examines a drawing, *The Annunciation* (c.1635) and a painting, *The Holy Family* (1633-35), both of which are common subjects within the European visual tradition. Since these subjects are based on New Testament text, they fulfil the requirements for a history painting and would appear to cause little concern within the Protestant world of Rembrandt's day. The emphasis will be on how Rembrandt subverts – or invokes, that tradition to his own cause and whether this makes these works cross-confessional or recognisably 'Protestant' or 'Catholic'.

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Ryan, *The Golden Legend*, Vols. 1 and 2 (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993). Also David R. Cartlidge and J. Keith Elliott, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha* (London: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> For a discussion on Rembrandt's possible relationship with the Jewish community in Amsterdam see Franz Landsberger, *Rembrandt, the Jews and the Bible* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1962); Stephen Nadler, *Rembrandt's Jews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Michael Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt* (California: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> See for example: Benjamin Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press, 2007); Charles H. Parker, *Faith on the Margins: Catholics and Catholicism in the Dutch Golden Age* (London: Harvard University Press, (2008); Frans Grijzenhout, ed. *The Golden Age of Dutch Painting in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).



The second category looks at works which have been labelled ‘Catholic’ or arguably made for a ‘Catholic audience’. It covers Rembrandt’s particular treatment of the Virgin in four subjects which would appear to find little favour within the formal constraints of a Protestant society. His etchings, *Death of the Virgin* (1639), *Virgin with Child in the Clouds* (1641) and *Virgin with the Instruments of the Passion* (c.1652), *Virgin with the Cat and Snake* (1654), cannot be identified as ‘biblical histories’ but instead, their subjects have been formulated through a long history of Catholic piety and devotion. These works indicate that Rembrandt’s understanding of both theological issues and symbolic form was greater than has previously been acknowledged.

This thesis asserts the importance of Rembrandt’s Marian works as a central theme in his New Testament *oeuvre*. These works are largely overlooked, I suggest, because of an emphasis placed on a presumed Protestant inspiration and intent, which directs attention towards works that are seen to favour that perspective. This theological and iconographical study of Rembrandt’s Marian works seeks to situate a largely un-researched body of his *oeuvre* within the complex religious patternings of a post-Reformation society in Amsterdam and the wider Dutch Republic and to place it more sympathetically within the ambit of recent socio-historical research.

# SECTION I

## THE CONTEXT

# Chapter One: Rembrandt the 'Protestant' artist: a short history of criticism

## Introduction

A measure of the difficulty surrounding any enquiry into a Protestant bias or otherwise in interpreting Rembrandt's work can be seen in the opening chapter of Shelley Perlove's *Impressions of Faith* (1989). The first paragraph indicates her position. She states that Rembrandt produced more than seventy religious prints for a flourishing market, "reflecting the Protestant emphasis on scripture."<sup>1</sup> Noting further Rembrandt's early education at the Latin school in Leiden, she observes that Rembrandt would have been well-versed in the principles of exegesis which were derived chiefly from a Calvinist reading of the Old Testament. Further still, she frames her assertions within the Catholic/Protestant dichotomy: Catholics saw Old Testament incidents as typologies or foreshadowings of the New, while the Protestants, embracing the entire book as the Word of God, explored a broad range of biblical events. She appears to contradict this statement in the following paragraph, where she states:

Implicit in the Calvinist interpretation of the Old Testament is the presence of Christ as Mediator, the events of the Pentateuch prophesying the future. As viewed by the theologian, the form of Christ was already traced in the Five Books of Moses.<sup>2</sup>

Perlove, in the first few paragraphs of her book, appears to define Rembrandt, his market and the much wider issue of Catholic/Protestant theology. Her assumptions are problematic for they presume an overall philosophy which guided Rembrandt's choice of subject for his religious prints and a clearly defined separation between Catholic and Protestant artistic dispositions.

Seymour Slive makes an all-important point when he discusses the religious implications of Rembrandt's art. He points out that although it would be unthinkable today for art historians to assess a painting solely in terms of its subject, in Rembrandt's day it was commonplace.<sup>3</sup> Contemporary critics who commented on Rembrandt's art paid attention to the Bible and the significance of the text; they did so

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<sup>1</sup> Shelley Perlove, "Visual Exegesis: The Calvinist Context for Rembrandt's Etchings of the Life on Abraham", in Shelley Perlove, ed. *Impressions of Faith* (Michigan: Dearborn, 1989): 11.

<sup>2</sup> Perlove, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Seymour Slive, *Rembrandt and his Critics, 1630-1750* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1953): 52.

in terms of the artist's technical skill and his ability to evoke emotion.<sup>4</sup> There is no evidence that the religious persuasion of the artist added any dimension to the interpretation of the work. Such ideas were not to become a factor in the analysis of Rembrandt's work until the nineteenth century.

Contemporary criticism of Rembrandt's work appeared to presume on some biblical knowledge in his presentation of religious subjects and noted only his skill as a painter. In his autobiography (1629-31), the secretary to the Stadhouder Frederik Hendrik, Constantijn Huygens (1596-1687), describes the artists of his time. He speaks only of the artistic style of those he was discussing and records the names of those he saw as having a particular talent. Huygens singles out Rembrandt for his skill at depicting emotion and appropriate gestures and movement.<sup>5</sup> Philips Angel, in his *Lof der Schilder-konst* (1642), concentrates on the importance of a thorough knowledge of biblical text, which he regards as a necessary preparation before the artist could embark on a history painting. The responsibility of the artist was to use his art but "not to misuse it or harm or distort the sense of the story" and he notes how deeply Rembrandt had reflected on the biblical text for his depiction of Sampson's wedding feast (*Sampson Posing a Riddle at his Wedding Feast* (1638)).<sup>6</sup> The poet Jeremias de Decker (1660), writing in praise of Rembrandt's New Testament work *Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalene* (1638), speaks of the artist's brush, his colours and his paint.<sup>7</sup> None of these writers comment on or reveal any expectation of a particular religious belief which might influence the way Rembrandt approaches his subjects. There is, however, an expectation that Rembrandt would have had a good knowledge of the biblical text.

Seventeenth-century posthumous criticism of Rembrandt lists his failures in response to a new classicist vogue.<sup>8</sup> This criticism concentrates on his inability to

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<sup>4</sup> *Rembrandt Documents*, 69.

<sup>5</sup> Noted in Seymour Slive, *Rembrandt and his Critics*, 52. The full text of Huygens' comments on Rembrandt and Jan Lievens is given in the *Rembrandt Documents*, 68-72.

<sup>6</sup> Philips Angel, "Praise of Painting", trans. Michael Hoyle, *Simiolus* 24 (1996): 245-246. The last of Angel's eight virtues that the painter must embrace speaks of the importance of a knowledge of 'the histories' in order not to make the mistakes of the inexperienced. He speaks specifically of the Bible, castigating an industrious painter for making a mistake in his iconography which could have been avoided if he had gone back to his Bible. Image source: Gary Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book*, New York, Abrams, 2006):199.

<sup>7</sup> Slive, *Rembrandt and his Critics*, 47. Image Source: Art and the Bible, <http://www.artbible.info/art/large/528.html>

<sup>8</sup> Ernst van der Wetering suggests that it was such early criticism which gave Rembrandt a bad press. See Ernst van der Wetering, "The Miracle of Our Age: Rembrandt Through the Eyes of his

follow the ‘rules of art’. Joachim von Sandrart (1606-1688) in his *Teutsche Academie* (1675-1679), states that Rembrandt did not hesitate to “oppose and contradict our rules of art such as anatomy and the proportion of the human body”.<sup>9</sup> Again there is no mention of religious persuasion.

The Florentine abbot Felippo Baldinucci (1624-1697) is the first writer to mention Rembrandt’s supposed religious affiliation. He writes mostly of Rembrandt’s defects. According to Baldinucci, Rembrandt was said to be full of pride and self-deceit and “professed in those days the religion of the *Menisti*, which though false too, was opposed to Calvin, inasmuch as they do not practise the rite of baptism before the age of thirty”.<sup>10</sup> Ernst van der Wetering points out that Rembrandt could not have been a Mennonite for this very reason; he had his children baptised in infancy.<sup>11</sup>

A more extensive account of Rembrandt’s abilities is given by Arnold Houbraken (1660-1719), who found him “whimsical”; he could depict emotion, but he “did not do it according to established principles.” Houbraken makes no comment about Rembrandt’s faith or of any particular religious or biblical content in his work.<sup>12</sup>

The lack of significant reference to Rembrandt’s religious affiliation in contemporary and immediately posthumous criticism makes it clear that in the earliest art-historical critique of Rembrandt’s work, the idea of a religious bias in the artist’s approach to biblical narrative was not an issue; only his particular skills or lack of them was of note. Baldinucci’s brief allegation of Rembrandt’s affiliation to the Mennonites appears to be made in the same derogatory terms as his criticism of Rembrandt’s art. The assertion that Rembrandt was a Mennonite was given credence

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Contemporaries”, in Albert Blankert, ed. *Rembrandt a Genius and his Impact* (Zwolle: Waanders, 1997): 63.

<sup>9</sup> Joachim von Sandrart, “Life of Rembrandt” from *Teutsche Academie* 1675, in *Lives of Rembrandt: Sandrart, Baldinucci and Houbraken*, ed. Charles Ford (London: Pallas Athene, 2007): 29-34.

<sup>10</sup> Felippo Baldinucci, “Life of Rembrandt” from *Cominciamento e Progresso dell’arte d’intagliare in rame colle vita de’ piu eccellenti maestri della stessa professione*, 1686, in Ford, *Lives of Rembrandt*, 37-48. Baldinucci, as a Catholic priest, was probably more interested in Rembrandt’s religious affiliation than most. He made the assertion that Rembrandt belonged to the Mennonite faith on the basis of information given to him by a former student of Rembrandt, Bernhard Kiel, who studied and worked with Rembrandt from 1648-1656.

<sup>11</sup> Ernst van der Wetering “Rembrandt: A Biography”, in Lene Bógh Rónberg and Eva de la Fuente Petersen, eds. *Rembrandt? The Master and his Workshop* (Copenhagen: Statens Museum for Kunst, 2006): 28-50.

<sup>12</sup> Arnold Houbraken, “Life of Rembrandt” in *De Grootte Schouburgh der Nederlandtsche Konstschilders en Schilderessen*, 1718-21, in Ford, *Lives of Rembrandt*: 64, 78.

by critics writing in the early nineteenth century. This information has subsequently been closely examined and is now thought to be unfounded.<sup>13</sup>

Criticism of Rembrandt's art was not limited to the Dutch Republic; Baldinucci was a Florentine and Sandrart a German. Much of the earliest criticism, however, comes from France. Another critique of Rembrandt's work was made by André Félibien (1619-1695) from the French *Academie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture*.<sup>14</sup> His writes of Rembrandt's etchings in his *Entretiens sur la vie et les ouvrages des plus excellents peintres* (Discussions on the life and works of the most outstanding painters) (1666-1688), describing some of them as *très curieuses* (very unusual) while Rembrandt's portrait paintings made him a *peintre assez universel* (widely-known painter).<sup>15</sup> While these comments add little factual information and there is nothing of a religious nature included, they do give some idea of Rembrandt's repute in contemporary French academic circles.

Roger de Piles (1635-1709) a French painter, engraver and diplomat, in his *Abregé de la Vie des Peintres* (Summary of the Life of Painters) published in 1699, laments the fact that Rembrandt had no academic training but was guided by "nature alone". According to de Piles, Rembrandt had little in common with his Dutch contemporaries; he was the only Dutch painter worthy of a place in de Piles' own pantheon of painters.<sup>16</sup> Again there is no record of any interest in Rembrandt's religious beliefs.

The importance of this early French perspective is seen in the continuing attention Rembrandt's work aroused in French academic circles. When the next wave of interest in Rembrandt came in the nineteenth century, it appears to be French writers such as Edgar Quinet (1803-1875) and Athanase Coquerel fils (1795-1868), a

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<sup>13</sup> Otto Benesch, writing in the 1950s, believed Rembrandt to be a Mennonite. Otto Benesch, *Rembrandt*, trans. James Emmons (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1957):14. Jakob Rosenberg, states that the evidence that Rembrandt belonged to the sect was "fairly positive". Jakob Rosenberg, *Rembrandt, Life and Work* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1948):109; Gary Schwartz suggests there was an affinity between Rembrandt and members of the Mennonite Church but there is no proof of any formal affiliation (Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book*, 199). Later writers, with the benefit of documentary evidence and further research, find no evidence to support this assertion. Arthur Wheelock and Peter Sutton point out that although no documentary evidence is available regarding a formal association with this sect, the fact that Rembrandt is known to have lived with a Mennonite family in his early years in Amsterdam, to have painted members of the church and to have chosen biblical subjects which appealed to members of that Church, show that he had a good knowledge of their beliefs and practices. See Arthur K. Wheelock and Peter C. Sutton *Rembrandt's Late Religious Portraits*, 24-25.

<sup>14</sup> André Félibien was a theoretician from the French *Academie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture*.

<sup>15</sup> Slive, *Rembrandt and his Critics*, 116, 117.

<sup>16</sup> Slive, 131-133.

Protestant minister, who first acknowledged the link between Rembrandt's art and his personal religious beliefs.<sup>17</sup> Their discussions should be understood within the context of the French political situation at the time.

In their eyes Rembrandt the romantic artist became Rembrandt the revolutionary. He was seen to embody the anti-Catholic, pro-democratic, pro-republican agendas of the would-be French revolutionaries. Coquerel called Rembrandt the "great rebel" because of his use of "non-Catholic" subject matter. He aligned him with Protestantism and used his art as evidence that Protestantism was not opposed to art.<sup>18</sup>

Tying Rembrandt ever more tightly into a Protestant ethos was the writing of Arsène Houssaye (1846), who, in his *Histoire de la peinture flamande et hollandaise* (History of Flemish and Dutch Painting) (1841) identified Rembrandt with Luther, because his images had the same power to promote revolution and reform:

Rembrandt thought that Catholicism with all its pomp and pleasures was nothing more than mythology ... Rembrandt gave grace to Luther, who had shown the Dutch the first rays of a new day, who united their spirit in revolt, who made free and strong men of his brothers.<sup>19</sup>

By now Rembrandt had become firmly established, at least within French art criticism, as a 'Protestant' artist. His anti-establishment persona had taken on a political aspect. The artistic heretic came to be viewed as the equivalent of the free-spirited Protestant republican.<sup>20</sup>

Outside of eighteenth-century French art-evangelisation, critics were more interested in connoisseurship than cultural history. Only occasionally were their comments interrupted by remarks on religion or cultural history.<sup>21</sup> It seems that it was only in the early part of the nineteenth century that concepts were developed in international art theory which gave status to Dutch art of the seventeenth century. Disapproval for the Dutch attachment to the imperfections that nature produced gave way to a growing admiration for their realism.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Edgar Quinet was a historian, professor and politician formerly Professor at the Collège de France from 1841-1851. See Alison McQueen, *The Rise of the Cult of Rembrandt: Reinventing the Old Master in Nineteenth-Century France* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003):112-13.

<sup>18</sup> McQueen, *The Rise of the Cult of Rembrandt*, 113.

<sup>19</sup> McQueen, 118.

<sup>20</sup> Timothy Potts, "Holland to New Holland" in Albert Blankert, ed. *Rembrandt a Genius and his Impact* (Zwolle: Waanders, 1997): 17.

<sup>21</sup> Seymour Slive, "Notes on the Relationship of Protestantism to Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting" *Art Quarterly* 19 (1956): 3-10, 5.

<sup>22</sup> Dedaldo Carasso "A New Image, German and French Thought on Dutch Art 1775-1860" in Frans Grijzenhout and Henk van Veen, *The Golden Age of Dutch Painting in a Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 108.

According to Dedaldo Carasso, the German writer, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), was one of the first writers to give shape to the idea of a Christian Rembrandt, noting that he (Goethe) was little interested in the rules of art but rather in Rembrandt's religious feelings.<sup>23</sup> It was Goethe who saw Rembrandt's refusal to study in Italy as an advantage, for it kept his work Dutch. He recognised that the difference in Netherlandish art was not in its style so much as in its essential 'Dutchness': "Dutchmen remain Dutch, indeed they are so governed by their national character that they ultimately retreat within their magic circle and eschew every foreign influence."<sup>24</sup> The philosopher George Wilhelm Hegel (1770-1831) was the first to systematically show that there was a connection between the social, religious and economic conditions in the Netherlands. In a lecture on aesthetics, *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*, given at the University of Berlin and published posthumously, he noted the association between national conditions and the shifts in the types of art which accompanied such changes. He noted in particular those conditions which were present when Netherlandish painting swung from traditional devotional pictures to portrait, genre, landscape and still-life.<sup>25</sup>

Within the Dutch Republic change was axiomatic until the short reunion of the Protestant North and the Catholic South (1815-1830), imposed by foreign powers, came to an end. Finally, two different political organisations and two distinct nations emerged. In a wave of nationalism new identities were established, crudely defined as the Protestant North and the Catholic South.<sup>26</sup> By the time Louis Royer's statue of Rembrandt was erected in the *Botermarkt* (Butter Market) in Amsterdam in 1852, Rembrandt had already been designated nationally as the leading artist of the seventeenth century and *ipso facto* a Protestant artist.<sup>27</sup> The dedication of this statue in itself sparked new interest among Dutch scholars in both Rembrandt and his art. It

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<sup>23</sup> Carasso, "A New Image", 109.

<sup>24</sup> Carasso, 116.

<sup>25</sup> Slive, "Notes on the Relationship of Protestantism to Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting", 5.

<sup>26</sup> Hans Kohn, "Nationalism in the Low Countries", *The Review of Politics* 19:2 (1957): 155-185, 158. Herman Paul and Bart Wallet note that at this point in Dutch history (up to and around 1817), October 31<sup>st</sup> – the day used to mark the Reformation, had become a day to celebrate not so much the confessional purity of the event itself but rather a date to celebrate civic freedom and Enlightenment. See Paul and Wallet "A Sun that Lost its Shine: The Reformation in Dutch Protestant Memory Culture, 1817-1917", *Church History and Religious Culture* 88 (2008): 35-62.

<sup>27</sup> McQueen, *The Rise of the Cult of Rembrandt*, 41.



was at this point that the Amsterdam archivist Pieter Scheltema (1812-1885) began to collect and record all extant documentation which referred to the master.<sup>28</sup>

Building on the success of this early archival work, the twentieth century saw a more intense examination of Rembrandt's personal life. His confessional identity started to become a matter of interest for it was not only a personal matter but it was tied to the political and religious identity of his country. Wilhelm Reinhold Valentiner (1880-1958) claims that Rembrandt was a Calvinist but that he showed an interest in Catholic subjects in some of his etchings. These etchings are better understood, he suggests, if we realise Rembrandt's mother was a Catholic and used, in her teaching of her son, not a Bible, but a fifteenth-century breviary.<sup>29</sup> Another art-historian of this time, Otto Benesch in his 1957 monograph on Rembrandt, pays little attention to Rembrandt's religious beliefs. He asserts that within Rembrandt's time, the devotional picture had ceased to exist. It had been replaced, he said, by historical pictures illustrating biblical episodes and that such works occupied a larger place in Rembrandt's work than in that of other Dutch painters.<sup>30</sup>

It was a difference in the manner and subject of Rembrandt's paintings which identified Rembrandt as a Protestant artist according to Jakob Rosenberg (1893-1980). He differentiates between Protestant and Catholic art of the Baroque period and designates Rembrandt as the outstanding representative of the Protestant group.<sup>31</sup> He does however refrain from identifying Rembrandt with the Protestant movement as a

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<sup>28</sup> Pieter Scheltema wrote of new research and recently discovered documentation in his *Rembrandt. Redevouring over het leven en de verdiensten van Rembrandt van Rijn* (Amsterdam, 1853). See also Pieter Scheltema, *Rembrandt, discours sur sa vie et son génie, avec un grand nombre de documents historiques* (Brussels, 1859, Paris, 1866).

Scheltema's contribution to Rembrandt research is further discussed in Marleen Blokhuis, "On the Life of Rembrandt van Rijn 1606-1669", in Albert Blankert, ed. *Rembrandt a Genius and His Impact* (Zwolle: Waanders, 1997), 22.

<sup>29</sup> William Reinhold Valentiner, *Rembrandt and Spinoza: A Study of the Spiritual Conflicts in Seventeenth-Century Holland* (London: Phaidon, 1957), 47. As evidence for this statement Valentiner identifies a painting made in 1631 as *Rembrandt's Mother Reading from a Breviary*. This description seems unlikely. A breviary is described as "A book containing the daily office of the Roman Catholic Church": Oxford Dictionary of Common English, 1987. It is normally much smaller in dimension than the book the woman in the picture appears to be reading. The *Brevarium Leydesdorpense* for instance, made in Leyerdorp in the second half of the fifteenth century was 148 x 118 x 55cm. This text is held in the library of the Lund University Sweden. By comparison, an early issue of the Statenbijbel (1654) was 14" x 10.5" x 4". [www.windmillministries.org/Antique-Dutch-Family-Bible-Store.htm](http://www.windmillministries.org/Antique-Dutch-Family-Bible-Store.htm) Consulted 6 July 2010. This same picture has been identified also as *An Old Woman Reading, Rembrandt's Mother and Rembrandt's Mother as the Prophetess Hannah*.

<sup>30</sup> Otto Benesch, *Rembrandt*, 55.

<sup>31</sup> Rosenberg supports this statement only by contrasting Rembrandt's work with that of Rubens. Rembrandt, he states, is "exceptional, almost unique, in giving expression to Protestant piety". According to Rosenberg, Rubens in line with Van Dyck, Murillo and a host of Italian painters, was a typical exponent of a Catholic approach (Rosenberg, *Rembrandt, Life and Work*, 178).

whole, seeing that movement as either rejecting or remaining indifferent to the pictorial expression of religious themes. He adds the phrase, which by constant usage contributes to the mythology that surrounds this famous artist: “Rembrandt is therefore exceptional, almost unique in giving expression to Protestant piety.”<sup>32</sup>

Writing in 1960, Visser 't Hooft examines the conclusions of several contemporary writers. He notes that Wilhelm Hausenstein (1882-1957) saw Rembrandt's biblical works as “more Catholic than Protestant” for his style recalls the childlike simplicity of the Middle Ages and provokes a mysticism inconsistent with Protestantism.<sup>33</sup> Wilhelm Bode (1830-1893) on the other hand, recognised “the most exalted expression of Dutch Calvinism in the work of this great painter”.<sup>34</sup> Visser 't Hooft himself notes that no other religious pictures are so little influenced by any ecclesiastical concerns than those of Rembrandt.<sup>35</sup> Only in the sense that he became deeply absorbed in biblical testimony, says 't Hooft, could his art be described as Protestant. The term ‘Calvinist’ or ‘Protestant’, he claims, could only have meaning if his style had actually been accepted as such by the Protestant churches, but Protestantism had little interest in his work.<sup>36</sup>

These four critics represent a middle stage in the interpretation of Rembrandt's work. They were working at a time when an “assumption that religious (indeed Christian) values provided the natural underpinning of the social order was widespread.”<sup>37</sup> There is an acknowledgement of Rembrandt's religious orientation, but it is a general one. A Protestant reading of biblical themes is presumed but not laboured. More important to each of these writers is the fact that Rembrandt appeared to be alone in his pursuit of religious themes within a Reformist world. A more concentrated interest in Rembrandt's religious beliefs came later.

According to Volker Manuth, a real interest in the personal religious beliefs of seventeenth-century Dutch artists began only after the 1980-81 exhibition *Gods*,

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<sup>32</sup> Rosenberg, 179.

<sup>33</sup> Willem Hausenstein, *Rembrandt* (Stuttgart, 1926): 467-8 quoted in Visser 't Hooft, *Rembrandt and the Gospels*, 108-109.

<sup>34</sup> Wilhelm Bode, *Rembrandt und seine Zeitgenossen* (Leipzig, 1907):11 quoted in Visser 't Hooft, *Rembrandt and the Gospel*, 109.

<sup>35</sup> Visser 't Hooft, 20.

<sup>36</sup> Visser 't Hooft, 116.

<sup>37</sup> Grace Darvie, “Religion” in Steve Taylor, ed. *Sociology: Issues and Debates* (London: Palgrave, 2000): 283.

*Saints and Heroes*.<sup>38</sup> A preoccupation with ‘realism’ writes Albert Blankert, editor of the exhibition catalogue, obscured the fact that schools of the best seventeenth-century Dutch artists devoted themselves exclusively to the painting of histories. This exhibition, for the first time, “successfully disengaged biblical art from the ongoing debates about realism in genre painting”.<sup>39</sup> It was, claims Manuth, with the “greatest hesitation” that scholars began to look to related disciplines to provide new material which allowed them a more differentiated picture of the relationship between fine art and Protestantism.<sup>40</sup>

Once this relationship had been established, it became ever more firmly entrenched in the literature, taking on an almost prophetic aspect which both asked and answered its own questions. Rembrandt *was* a Protestant; he was therefore a Protestant painter. It became necessary therefore to discover something in the way he approached both subject and iconography which adhered unquestionably to Protestant thought and creed. This raises the question: is there a distinctly Protestant typology in Northern art?

## What is Protestant art?

At a political level, there was obviously a deep difference between Catholic and Protestant art in the newly-formed Dutch Republic of Rembrandt’s day.<sup>41</sup> The bitter, visual invective, that ranged itself on both sides of the debate saw, on the Protestant side, art stripped from the churches and the Pope and Catholic practice ridiculed and lampooned in countless highly-distributable broadsheets and etchings. At a religious level, Protestant artwork focussed on the word of God, as written in the Bible and promulgated from the pulpit. Mia Mochizuki traces the change in Netherlandish art during the period 1566-1672. Beginning with iconoclasm, she records how a unique aesthetic evolved for the Dutch Reformed Church, which forged a new visual

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<sup>38</sup> Volker Manuth, “Denomination and Iconography: The Choice of Subject matter in the Biblical Paintings of the Rembrandt Circle”, *Simiolus* 27 (1993-4): 235

<sup>39</sup> Albert Blankert, ed. *Gods, Saints and Heroes: Dutch Painting in the Age of Rembrandt* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1980): 15.

<sup>40</sup> Manuth, *Denomination and Iconography*, 235.

<sup>41</sup> The Dutch Republic was formed in 1588. In 1579 the Protestant Northern Provinces of the Netherlands had signed the Treaty of Utrecht in which they promised to support each other against the Catholic Spanish army. Having failed to choose their own leader, they formed a republic which was officially recognised by Spain in the Peace of Westphalia 1648.

identity.<sup>42</sup> The Word made material emerged as an art form in its own right.<sup>43</sup> It took the form of the printed word, prayers, admonitions and most commonly the Ten Commandments inscribed on altarpieces and the fabric of the church alike (fig.1). On the Catholic side, clandestine churches commissioned works which championed the ‘Church Triumphant’, appropriating Christ and the saints to their cause and dressing them in Catholic liturgical regalia, with God the Father often adorned with the Papal three-tiered crown (fig.2, 2a).<sup>44</sup> At a more personal level, the differences were not so obvious.

The very nature of religion as expressed through the visual tradition – its appeal to the emotions, its reinforcement of long-held religious beliefs, its evocation of events which enhanced and anticipated the hope of salvation – had been ostensibly all but suppressed by the politics of the Reformation. Luther, and after him Calvin, believed that spiritual things must not be represented. God could not be displayed as he could not be perceived by the human eye. Stories and events which could be seen and understood and served some educational or cautionary purpose, however, could be displayed.<sup>45</sup> The exception was art intended for the home. This in itself created another level of difference, that of art which functioned as an inspirational aid within the personal space of the home for both Catholic and Protestant alike, as opposed to art that served the public sphere. It is in the domestic area of commission and personal piety that Rembrandt’s religious work operated.

The interest raised by the *Gods, Saints and Heroes* exhibition called for an academic response. An examination of the extent to which religious conflict defined the subject and context of Rembrandt’s work has become a fruitful subject for debate. In seeking to define the differences between ‘Catholic’ and ‘Protestant’ art, a comparative mode has become established; the obvious example becomes a comparison between Rembrandt and Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640).

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<sup>42</sup> Mia Mochizuki, *The Netherlandish Image after Iconoclasm 1566-1672* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008): 13.

<sup>43</sup> Reformed art and culture after the iconoclasm has attracted much academic attention. See in particular the more recently published works: William A. Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture*; Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Mia M. Mochizuki, *The Netherlandish Image after Iconoclasm 1566-1672*.

<sup>44</sup> For an extensive historiography of the art-work found in the clandestine churches of Amsterdam see Xander van Eck, *Clandestine Splendor: Paintings for the Catholic Church in the Dutch Republic* (Waanders: Zwolle, 2007).

<sup>45</sup> Isla M. Veldman, “Protestantism and the Arts: Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Netherlands”, 417. See also Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image*; Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992).

David R. Smith uses this dichotomy to advance his rigorously-argued determination for a distinctly Protestant aesthetic in Rembrandt's work.<sup>46</sup> A specifically Protestant approach to biblical text, according to Smith, is a meditational response to the narrative. Protestant thought sought to bring biblical events into one's life rather than transport the believers into sacred history. Catholic art, as its antithesis, sought to feed the emotions, to transport the mind and the heart to higher things.<sup>47</sup> In choosing Rembrandt's etching *Sacrifice of Isaac* (1655) (fig.3) to illustrate his point in opposition to Ruben's oil study of the same scene (1620) (fig.4), Smith pits not only different approaches to the subject against each other but also different media, the black and white of an etching against the brilliance of oils, the Spartan choice of Calvinism versus the Baroque voluptuousness of Catholic patronage. There is also the point of scale and dramatic viewing point; Rembrandt's work was a small etching, Rubens' was a cartoon for a ceiling painting.

A comparative positioning between Rembrandt and Rubens is, however, fraught. It is tempting to use such examples, for these oppositions fit within the parameters of the geographical, nationalistic and religious ideologies of a reinvigorated Dutch Republic. Within the hypothesis of Smith's essay, these two artists provide as he says, a "perfect dialectical opposition."<sup>48</sup> So insidious has this opposition become as a means of expressing a 'Catholic' versus 'Protestant' typology, that Schama divides the text of his historiography of the life of Rembrandt, *Rembrandt's Eyes* (1999), roughly into two halves: one representing Rubens' life, the other, Rembrandt's life, lived partly in emulation of and partly in contrast to Ruben's life.<sup>49</sup> Such an opposition serves many purposes, but it must be tempered since both artists have been annexed to support ideologies in a way unthought-of in their own day.

A different approach is taken by Catharine Randall. A Protestant position is shown in Rembrandt's art, she suggests, not so much in style as in approach.<sup>50</sup> She argues

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<sup>46</sup> Smith argues for a Protestant reading of Rembrandt's work based on a formal principle of antithesis or *contrapposto*, a preoccupation with paradox. There is a Catholic emphasis on 'works' he says, in the belief that man is capable of striving for his own redemption. Protestant thought rests on man's sinfulness and redemption through God's grace. This he sees evident in Rembrandt's religious works which reflect his Protestant convictions. Smith appears to ground his arguments for a Protestant aesthetics on the double principle of *contrapposto* and a perceived favouring of Old Testament subjects by Protestant painters. See David R. Smith, "Towards a Protestant Aesthetics" *Art History* 8.3 (1985): 291.

<sup>47</sup> Smith, "Towards a Protestant Aesthetics", 297.

<sup>48</sup> Smith, 293.

<sup>49</sup> See Simon Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999).

<sup>50</sup> Randall, "Rembrandt's Protestant Icons", 32.

that Rembrandt's works display "an especially Pauline influence, an influence most commonly associated with the emergence of Protestant theology." This, she recognises, in Rembrandt's "almost bestial" representation of Adam and Eve and his graphic sexual depiction seen in his etching *Joseph with Potiphar's Wife* (1634), which draw the viewer in and heighten the "prototypically Protestant sense of the lure of sin." It is found again throughout Rembrandt's *oeuvre* in his preoccupation with self, in his self-portraits and his fascination with ideas of blindness, insight, self-scrutiny and revelation.<sup>51</sup>

The implication of Protestant thought on Rembrandt's work is interpreted by William Halewood in a return to history. The important factor, he believes, is found in a Protestant anti-Catholicism built into the revolt against Spanish rule. War with Catholic Spain was constant from 1568-1609 and intermittent from 1609-1648.<sup>52</sup> Rembrandt's youth was spent at a time when Protestant ideas both within Protestantism itself and against the Church of Rome were seeking self-definition. According to Halewood, this had a powerful influence on Rembrandt's later life and work. The features of Rembrandt's work which need to be examined in terms of Protestant influence, he asserts, are not his anti-classicism, but his adoption of a "low/high style" – a humble style used in an elevated manner.<sup>53</sup>

The Reformation, claims Halewood, did not express itself against classicism *per se* but against a classical conception of the human ideal. With the slogan *sola scriptura*, Luther elevated the Bible to a position "above all written works."<sup>54</sup> The Bible gave power to the humble. Rembrandt's interest in beggars can be seen as didactic, conceived to show the condition of sin – despair, poverty, impurity and dependence – which, according to the teachings of primitive Protestantism, was the inescapable condition of man without grace.<sup>55</sup> Rembrandt's 'beggar etchings' are almost pure realism, he observes, and it is here that they "make contact with the obsessive preoccupations of early Protestantism" (fig.5).<sup>56</sup>

These same images are also seen by Robert Baldwin as indicative of Protestant thought. They could be interpreted as a personal reflection on charity. Charity was of

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<sup>51</sup> Randall, "Rembrandt's Protestant Icons", 33. Image source: Gary Schwartz, ed. *The Complete Etchings of Rembrandt* (New York: Dover Publications, 1994): B39.

<sup>52</sup> William Halewood, "Rembrandt's Low Diction", *Oud-Holland* 107:3 (1993): 287-295.

<sup>53</sup> Halewood, *Rembrandt's Low Diction* 289.

<sup>54</sup> Halewood, 288.

<sup>55</sup> Halewood, 292.

<sup>56</sup> Halewood, 293.

great importance in Dutch seventeenth-century society. It was a divinely-inspired moral obligation. Baldwin again makes a comparison between the works of Rembrandt and those of Rubens. The ragged, humble, lowliness that can be seen in the etchings of the *Penitent Jerome* (1635) (fig.6), *Flight into Egypt* (1633) (fig.7) and the painted work, the Munich *Holy Family* (c.1635) (fig.8) reflect, he says, a Protestant account of Christ's life and values. They can be compared with the "typical Catholic images" of Rubens' heroic and idealistic *Descent from the Cross* (1611-14) (fig.9).<sup>57</sup> But Rubens lived in a different world. Rubens was a truly international artist and diplomat working in a European manner and style which suited his patrons. He ran a large studio and accepted commissions from all over Europe. He painted vast altarpieces and allegorical cycles for royalty. Rembrandt never travelled outside of the Dutch Republic. He made only one religious painting that was large enough to be an altarpiece, *The Holy Family* (1633-1635), although it was never intended for that purpose and he received few commissions. His work was largely self-sourced.

In a discussion on a particular group of early Rembrandt etchings of St. Jerome, *Jerome kneeling: a large plate* (1629), *Jerome Praying: arched print* (1632) and *Jerome kneeling in prayer, looking down* (1635), Catherine Scallen adopts both Halewood's and Baldwin's hypotheses.<sup>58</sup> She recognises in Rembrandt's humble treatment of the saint, a reformation of this Catholic subject into one which would be acceptable also to Protestants. She seeks to make a distinction between a Catholic interpretation of the subject, which she identifies as a focus on penitence, physical chastisement or the performance of good works, and a Protestant interpretation, which responds to meditative, repentant figures. Protestant theologians, she says, emphasise the difference between "repentance" and "penitence".<sup>59</sup> Penitential behaviour and works of penance were looked on with suspicion by Protestants; repentance was used as the appropriate internal response to sin for it reflected both an acknowledgement of sorrow and a faith in God's forgiveness. In these works, she reads the absence of

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<sup>57</sup> Robert Baldwin, "On Earth we are Beggars as Christ Himself Was: The Protestant Background of Rembrandt's Imagery of Poverty, Disability and Begging", *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift* LIV 3 (1985): 122-135.

<sup>58</sup> See Catherine Scallen "Rembrandt's Reformation of a Protestant Subject: The Penitent and Repentant Saint Jerome", *The Sixteenth-Century Journal* 30.1 (1999): 71-88. Image source: Gary Schwartz, *The Complete Etchings of Rembrandt* (New York: Dover Publications, 1994): B106, B101, B120.

<sup>59</sup> Repentance means a sorrow for sin or failings and a resolve to avoid such sins or failings in the future. Penitence carries a more active component. There is some prayer or good work required to show that the person is genuinely sorry for their failings. Hence Jerome is shown in sack cloth with a rock symbolic of his active response to an awareness of his failings.

motifs alluding to Jerome's self-mortification (the rock with which it is said he struck himself) and Christ's Passion (the crucifix), as Rembrandt's rejection of Catholic imagery. If this were so, Rembrandt's iconography is not consistent. Her conclusions are debateable, for in two later works, *St. Jerome in a dark chamber* (1642) and *St. Jerome beside a pollard willow* (1648) the saint clearly sits before his associated motifs – a skull and a crucifix.<sup>60</sup> While the etchings Scallen discusses may have appealed to a Protestant clientele, Rembrandt's later works suggest this was not his primary focus.

Rembrandt both responded to and anticipated the needs of his patrons in terms of his contemporary society and his own visual history. Goethe noted the 'essential Dutch-ness' of the Dutch citizen.<sup>61</sup> This basic uniformity of values, of political and personal ways of being, is recognisably translated into the arts. "There is a national psychology of form", according to Heinrich Wölfflin, which is notable in the work of Dutch painters.<sup>62</sup> Rembrandt remained essentially a Dutch painter, committed to a realism which eschewed the voluptuous extravagance of Baroque art. His work was enlivened by the visual tradition which came to him through artworks and copies available to him from within his own country.<sup>63</sup> The difference is as much in style, destination and nationalistic fervour as it is in a partiality to any particular religious sensitivity.

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<sup>60</sup> In *St. Jerome beside a pollard willow* a skull sits on the table in front of the saint with a crucifix propped against a pile of books behind it. See Schwartz, *The Complete Etchings*, B103. In *St. Jerome in a Dark Chamber* the skull sits on a shelf above the desk while the crucifix hangs between the two windows. See Schwartz, B105.

In her comparison of Rembrandt's etching *St. Jerome Praying: Arched Print* with Willem Buytewech's etching *St. Francis* (1632), Scallen notes that Rembrandt dresses his Jerome in a Franciscan habit as does Buytewech. She notes also that Rembrandt has substituted a leather belt for the Franciscan cord normally seen in pictures of St. Francis. By doing this, says Scallen, Rembrandt has "removed associations of penitence from this article of clothing" thereby separating him from a specifically Catholic context (Scallen, 80).

The cord worn around the waist by members of the Franciscan order represents the ropes tied around Christ at his Passion. The three knots represent the three vows made by Franciscan priests, those of poverty, chastity and obedience. They have no specific reference to penitence except as a reminder of those vows. It is difficult to identify a leather belt in the given examples. In each case the cincture has the texture and appearance of a rope girdle.

<sup>61</sup> "Dutchmen remain Dutch, indeed they are so governed by their national character that they ultimately retreat within their magic circle and eschew every foreign influence". See Goethe quoted in Carasso, 109

<sup>62</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art* trans. M. D. Hottinger (London: Dover Publications, 1986): 5.

<sup>63</sup> Christopher Brown in his First Golden Age Lecture "The Dutchness of Dutch Art" (2002) writes extensively of the qualities which are found exclusively in Dutch art which made it significantly different from that found elsewhere in Europe (Brown, "The Dutchness of Dutch Art" (Amsterdams Centrum voor de Studie van de Gouden Eeuw: Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2002): 5-29.



## Recent research

Attempts to argue, as Smith does, for a Protestant aesthetic, as expressed in one particular work, appear simplistic when compared with more recent research. Volker Manuth asserts in his study of inventories of both Catholic and Protestant households that “there is no convincing evidence that any one denomination privileged certain themes or iconography.” The motive behind the original commission or any further purchase “in so far as it can be reconstructed, appears to have nothing to do with the denomination of the artist.”<sup>64</sup>

There are many instances of Catholic painters working for Protestant clients and vice-versa. Thomas de Keyser (1597-1677) for instance, an Amsterdam Remonstrant painter, painted the children of an unknown Catholic family, and included fitting iconography.<sup>65</sup> The Catholic painters Theodore van Thulden (1609-1669), Gerard van Honthorst (1592-1656) and Pieter de Grebber (1600-1653) all worked on the Oranjezaal in Huis ten Bosch (1648-52), a memorial for the Reformed Stadhouder Frederik Hendrik, commissioned by his widow Amalia von Solms.<sup>66</sup> An even more striking example is the altarpiece made for the Catholic Church of Onze Lieve Vrouwekerk in Huissen (Gelderland) of *Sts. Willibrord and Boniface kneeling before the Trinity* (fig.10). The painter, Jan van Bijlert (1597-1671), was a prominent member of the Protestant Church.<sup>67</sup>

Another work by van Bijlert, *The Calling of St. Matthew* (1625-30), based on Caravaggio’s famous composition, was commissioned by St. Mary’s clandestine Catholic church (Utrecht), as was an anonymous painting *The Incredulity of Thomas*.<sup>68</sup> Both show themes of conversion thought to be favoured by the Protestants. As van Eck points out, however, these same subjects were also being commissioned for Catholic Churches although for different reasons. They responded as easily to a period in Catholic art where doubting believers or ignorant characters acted as role models. These figures served as reminders (for those who were wavering in their

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<sup>64</sup> Manuth, *Denomination and Iconography*, 238.

<sup>65</sup> Pieter J. J. van Thiel, “Catholic Elements in seventeenth-century Dutch painting, apropos of a children’s portrait by Thomas de Keyser”, *Simiolus* 20 (1990-1991): 39-62.

<sup>66</sup> Veldman, “Protestantism and the Arts”, 409.

<sup>67</sup> Manuth, *Denomination and Iconography*, 238. This painting was thought to have been commissioned by a Catholic brotherhood for the Church. The painting was destroyed in 1943.

<sup>68</sup> Van Eck, *Clandestine Splendor*, 69. Image source: Van Eck, *Clandestine Splendor*: 68, 74.

commitment to the Catholic Church) of the power of Christ's call and the acceptability of returning to the faith after a period of doubt.<sup>69</sup>

Where some iconography is distinctively Catholic, (despite the religious beliefs of the painter) as is van Bijlert's painting of *Sts Willibrord and Boniface*, other work is recognisably Protestant. Images such as Lucas Cranach's (1472-1553) 1527 woodcut *Hallowed be thy Name* (fig.11) places its emphasis on the scriptures and the preached 'word'; there is no doubt about what religious persuasion each represents. None of Rembrandt's work, however, is as actively partisan. What is at issue here is whether or not some of Rembrandt's religious works can be seen as displaying a specifically and solely Protestant agenda.<sup>70</sup>

The identification of a 'Protestant' Rembrandt rests, for most critics, on two foundations, that of his familial background, which includes his formal or civic adherence to the requirements of the Reformed Church, and an identification of Pauline themes central to Protestant teaching seen in Rembrandt's work. Rembrandt's affinity to St. Paul is described by Schama in terms of Protestant theology: "Paul's emphasis relentlessly prescribed on salvation by grace alone had given him a paramountcy in Calvinist culture." His particular appeal to Rembrandt, Schama claims, lay in his (Paul's) "anathema to the law and his repeated reiteration not just that the law was irrelevant to salvation but its authority was a fraud and a curse, compared with the arbitration of the compassionate almighty."<sup>71</sup> Rembrandt's identification with Pauline philosophy reaches its peak in his self-identification with the saint himself, his *Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul* (1661) (fig.12). For Schama, Rembrandt here becomes a Paul, not of "forbidding remoteness but a Paul of consoling humanity, a Paul for everyday sinners."<sup>72</sup> Such an interpretation relies for its veracity on a particular approach to both Rembrandt's work and the biblical texts

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<sup>69</sup> Van Eck, 68-70.

<sup>70</sup> On this point see also Joby who argues from a position that Calvin was not as opposed to religious art as has been thought and Rembrandt, intentionally or not, produced works that are consistent with themes that are central to the Reformer's thoughts (Joby, *Calvinism and the Arts*, 144).

<sup>71</sup> Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes*, 657.

Christopher Braider points out that Rembrandt's self-identification as the Apostle Paul is not the only likeness that Rembrandt assumed but he does agree that the theme had a special relevance. In a comparison with Caravaggio's *The Conversion of St. Paul* (1600-1601) Braider suggests that it is not a 'scriptural imitation' which motivated these two artists but rather their uncompromising resistance to poetic taste. There was a powerful ambivalence in both artists – both studied nature, neither tried to improve creation. There is, he says, something deeper than a perceived Protestant thought, there is a new authority grounded in a deep philosophical content even in the art of painting itself. See Braider, "The Fountain of Narcissus: The Invention of Subjectivity and the Pauline Ontology of Art in Caravaggio and Rembrandt", *Comparative Literature* 50.4 (1998): 286-315.

<sup>72</sup> Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes*, 658.

which may have inspired him which limits a reading to those works which support this view.

Philip Benedict raises the question of “whether or not Calvinism formed a distinct culture of such strength and coherence that work by Calvinists for Calvinists can properly be interpreted as expressing a Calvinist sensibility.”<sup>73</sup> The issue of the use of images of all types and the question of whether Calvinist theology promoted a consistently different type of relationship with the visual world is an on-going enquiry.<sup>74</sup> Given the evidence that Protestant painters painted for Catholic churches and Catholic patrons and vice-versa, it is not possible to know what ‘Calvinist art’ might look like.<sup>75</sup> The individual artist was constantly reconciling the competing demands of theological precept and the needs of the market. The topic of Calvinism and the arts, Benedict says, raises questions about cultural appropriation, theological systems and their interaction with complex elements of culture.<sup>76</sup> It is an issue which continues to be problematic. It is against this background that a thorough analysis of Rembrandt’s Marian works should take place.

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<sup>73</sup> Philip Benedict, “Calvinism as a Culture”, in Paul Corby Finney, ed. *Seeing Beyond the Word: Visual Arts in the Calvinist Tradition*, 24.

<sup>74</sup> Benedict, “Calvinism as a Culture”, 43.

<sup>75</sup> Benedict, 42.

<sup>76</sup> Benedict, 44.

## Chapter Two: An Historical Context

### Introduction

An examination of the writings of Rembrandt's contemporaries has shown that the religious affiliation of the artist was not a consideration in their interpretation of his work. Such ideas were largely a construct of nineteenth-century political, social and art historical values. But the religious divisions, the separation from the Church of Rome and the formation of various 'protesting' churches, which preceded and continued throughout Rembrandt's life, did have a deep and lasting effect on the nature and subject matter of the visual arts. Whether the changes these events wrought did eventually yield an identifiable iconological style in art that was recognisably 'Protestant' remains a matter for debate. If it is accepted that a distinctive style did emerge, two questions are raised: what did such art look like and did Rembrandt's biblical art represent a particularly 'Protestant' interpretation of biblical events? This problem cannot be adequately explained simply by an analysis of the iconography of specific works. To appreciate what relevance a Protestant or Catholic interpretation might have on an understanding of Rembrandt's biblical *oeuvre*, it is necessary to have some idea of the historical context within which his art was made.

According to the historian Judith Pollmann, it is the failure to contextualise ideas of religious expression and tolerance within contemporary norms which has allowed modern notions to seep into the assumptions we make about the seventeenth-century Dutch experience.<sup>1</sup> Rembrandt's art was made within a post-Reformation period of political and religious upheaval but it was with the Reformation itself that change began. This chapter gives a brief analysis of the events which began with Martin Luther's denouncement of the Catholic *status quo*. It indicates, more importantly, the downward trajectory of the place of the Virgin in Reformed thought; from her hallowed status within Catholic theology and devotion, to a role limited to her human and humble status as the mother of Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Pollmann, *Religious Choice in the Dutch Republic: The Reformation of Arnoldus Buchelius (1565-1641)* (Manchester: Manchester Unity Press, 1999): 3.

## The reformation of ideas

When Martin Luther (1483-1546) nailed his Ninety Five Theses to the door of the Cathedral at Wittenberg on the Eve of All Saints' Day 1517, a process began which changed the course of history. The religious historian Peter Matheson views the Reformation less as a doctrinal shift or structural upheaval than as an event in the imagination – a “shift in the basic paradigms through which people viewed their world.”<sup>2</sup> The process of reform which Luther initiated addressed with increasing intensity the manner in which this altered world-view was presented to the people.

In liberating the word of God, the basic idea of Reformed theology, scripture and theology were made accessible to a generally uninformed population. Where this information had previously been available to the people through the visual arts, the written word now became paramount. Sermons and pamphlets, says Matheson, filled the minds of the people with the biblical imaginations of patriarchs, prophets, psalmists and apostles.<sup>3</sup> Paradoxically, such a monumental mind-shift carried within itself the seeds of the destruction of an important aspect of its own imagination – the biblical world as seen through the eyes of countless artists through the centuries.<sup>4</sup> An increasingly virulent censorship of the visual arts bore the bitter fruit of iconoclasm – the destruction or defacing of works of religious art, which began in the Netherlands on 10 August 1566.<sup>5</sup>

The word of God perceived through the media of sculpture, painting and illustrated religious tracts gave flesh to the spoken word. Paintings were, according to David Freedberg, truly the books of the illiterate. Although none of the writers from Gregory the Great to Luther approved of the adoration of images, especially those

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Matheson, *The Imaginative World of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd., 2000): 2.

<sup>3</sup> Matheson, 42.

<sup>4</sup> Luther did not in fact make any mention of images in his famous Ninety Five Theses of 1517. His concern was about the sale of indulgences. It was only later when certain elements among his followers had resorted to iconoclasm that Luther was forced to turn his attention to the subject of images. His views developed in a series of sermons preached in the week of 9 March 1522, where Luther sought to sketch out his views about worship and liturgy in order to assert his authority over a volatile situation (Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture*, 53).

<sup>5</sup> Although sporadic outbreaks of iconoclasm had occurred since the beginning of the Reformation both in France and in the Netherlands itself it had always been local and on a small scale. On 10 August 1566 a terrifying outbreak of image smashing and church destruction swept the Dutch countryside. In less than two weeks organized mobs had vandalized and pillaged churches in almost seventeen provinces (Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 280).

For further information about the effects of iconoclasm on the image see Phyllis Mack Crew, *Calvinist Preaching and Iconoclasm in the Netherlands 1544-1567* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978). See also Alain Besançon, trans. Jane Marie Todd, *The Forbidden Image: An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

purported to work miracles, these were exactly the images that lay at the centre of the religiosity of simple folk.<sup>6</sup> Images had a power all their own because they spoke not to the intellect but to the emotions. This power was recognised and it had to be controlled. Arbiters and censors became a necessity to ensure people viewed only the ‘right’ image.<sup>7</sup> Nowhere was this more evident than in the countries where such an ideological upheaval had its beginnings: in the Germany of Martin Luther, monk, theologian and university professor, and the France of John Calvin (1509-1564), theologian and pastor, originally trained as a humanist lawyer, who broke from Rome in the 1620’s. The power of the image, however, had its roots in medieval piety.

## The medieval mind

The world into which both Luther and Calvin were born was a world of saints and sinners, where one could redeem the other through a complex mix of common religion, divine power and immanence; the sacred was diffused in the profane, the spiritual within the material.<sup>8</sup> Almost anything was thought to be possible through divine intervention, sought and bought from innumerable holy places and through the auspices of churches and church functionaries. The punishment due to sin could be ameliorated by pious practice or practical provision. The granting of ‘indulgences’ (the notional vehicle through which such services could be rendered) for works of piety or, more contentiously, in response to financial donations, was to become the defining issue for Luther’s break with Rome.<sup>9</sup>

Central to the issue of conflict and change was ‘idolatry’. It was a name which critics attached itself to most aspects of medieval Catholic piety but most aggressively

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<sup>6</sup> Gregory the Great’s (540-604) notable pronouncement about the place of images in the religious life of the Church states that although one could approve - indeed praise - the view that one should not adore images, to break them was wrong. Luther followed in condemning the misuse of images but disapproved of the destruction of images which took place with iconoclasm. See David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago, London: Chicago University Press, 1989): 398.

<sup>7</sup> Freedberg, 398.

<sup>8</sup> Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> In 1517 Martin Luther wrote a letter to the Archbishop of Mainz protesting the sale of indulgences some of the proceeds of which were to be sent to Rome for the building of St. Peter’s. He sent him a copy of his 95 Theses for debate which was presented on 31 October 1517. The subsequent investigation of Luther’s orthodoxy by the Archbishop publicised the affair. Some time before that however Luther had had a profound evangelical experience which altered his attitudes towards accepted Catholic theology. His claims were two: we should rely on scripture alone for our theology and our salvation did not depend on works but on faith alone. See Ninian Smart, *The World’s Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 318-320.

to the outward observations of such piety: to shrines, images, relics, saints and to the all-important tenet of Catholic observance, the Mass.

Such was the intensity of popular belief in the external manifestations of religion that the consecrated host from the Mass became the *locus divinitatis* (the visual location of the God made man), capable of all types of miracles yet, in itself, even more remote, since participation in communion remained rare and infrequent.<sup>10</sup> While many concerned voices were raised about the manner and intent of such so-called religious observances, which became little more than popular superstition, these voices found their champion most effectively in the ideas of Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536), a Dutch humanist and theologian of whom it is said that he laid the egg that Luther hatched.<sup>11</sup> Erasmus sought to recover “pure doctrine” which, he argued, could only be found at its sources: the New Testament and the expositions of the early Fathers. His desire was to restore Christianity to its roots and to re-invigorate its primitive purity.<sup>12</sup>

## The protagonists

Erasmus’ *Enchiridion Militis Christiani* (handbook or sword for the Christian soldier, 1503), exposed his predilection for the internal and spiritual as opposed to the external and material in religion: the actions of the individual, he says, must always reflect what lies in the heart. With this manual, Erasmus equipped the Christian soldier for

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<sup>10</sup> Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 17.

A manifestation of the popular devotion to the Eucharist (the host) can be seen in an annual procession which takes place in Amsterdam to this day. This procession recalls the ‘Miracle of the Eucharist’ which took place on 12 March 1345. A dying man asked to receive Holy Viaticum (the last Eucharist). The pastor from the Oude Kerke was called to administer the Eucharist to the man who promptly vomited it up. In keeping with the priest’s instructions, the vomit was thrown on the fire. As the grate was raked the next morning the host was seen intact and glowing. A servant was able to retrieve it without burning her hand; the host was placed in a box and the priest was called. The host was then taken in procession to the church and placed in the pyx (a small container for carrying the host). When the pyx was opened the host had disappeared, only to be found later back in the original box. The home of the sick man became a place of pilgrimage and a ‘Holy Room’ was built there. In 1480 when the Archduke Maximillian received a cure at the shrine, he donated a stained-glass window in thanksgiving. In the second half of the sixteenth-century the ‘Holy Room’ came under Protestant rule but continued as a sanctuary. In 1910, rather than hand the property back to the Catholic Church it was demolished but the procession itself continues on 12 March each year.

The Eucharist itself became a popular subject for paintings. See Daniel Seghers (1590-1661), for example, whose *Flower Garland with the Holy Sacrament* (c.1645-51) shows a host with chalice beneath, raised up by a cherub and surrounded by a garland of flowers. Image source: V & A, <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O132433/oil-painting-a-garland-of-flowers-surrounding/>

<sup>11</sup> Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 28.

<sup>12</sup> Eire suggests that Erasmus laid more than one egg and these were hatched in succession by Karlstadt, Zwingli and Calvin “resembling their parent more closely in some respects than Luther’s ever did” (Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 28).

war, “a war between *caro* (flesh) and *spiritus* (spirit)”, things of this world and things of heaven. It was a battle against the world and its seduction.<sup>13</sup> The key to understanding the place of God in the world, Erasmus said, was to accept all that was visible only as representations of a higher invisible God.<sup>14</sup> Unlike other Christian theologians, he would concede no real connection between image and prototype; since the spiritual could be reached without matter, there was no need for the image.<sup>15</sup>

In his earlier years, Erasmus had some interest in painting and music.<sup>16</sup> Tradition has it that he practised painting while a young cleric in the monastery of Steyn near Gouda. The only tangible items of evidence of his artistic activity that remain are some drawings for the marginalia of his *Scholia* (critical or explanatory comments) to the *Letters of St. Jerome*.<sup>17</sup> He was not an iconoclast, but as Erwin Panofsky puts it: “like any good theologian, he insisted that what was good in an image was not the material effigy but the idea it represents, not the *signa* (sign) but the *divi ipsi* (divinity itself).”<sup>18</sup>

Erasmus did, however, see some justification for the destruction that iconoclasm wrought.<sup>19</sup> Recognising the power of the image as “silent poetry”, he was aware that at times the image could have a stronger effect on human emotions than a man, even an eloquent one, could achieve by words.<sup>20</sup> While Erasmus ‘laid the egg’, the actual war on the image was left to others. It was this internal involvement, the primacy of matters of the spirit and the intellect, which lay at the core of Erasmus’ theology that captured the attention of Andreas Bodenstein van Karlstadt (1486-1541) (fig.13), Luther’s colleague at the University of Wittenberg. It is with Karlstadt that the Protestant attack on Roman Catholic ‘idolatry’ began.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 31.

<sup>14</sup> Eire, 35.

<sup>15</sup> Eire, 35-36.

<sup>16</sup> Erwin Panofsky, “Erasmus and the Visual Arts”, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 32 (1969): 202.

<sup>17</sup> Panofsky, 203.

<sup>18</sup> Panofsky, 207.

<sup>19</sup> Erasmus was offended by extreme forms of iconoclasm but like many humanist thinkers of the time, he worried more about why so much money was spent on building, decorating and enriching churches when “brothers and sisters” were wasting away from hunger and thirst (Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture*, 105).

<sup>20</sup> Panofsky, *Erasmus and the Visual Arts*, 211.

<sup>21</sup> While Luther had been under the protective custody of Frederick the Wise at Warburg castle Karlstadt had incited the people to attack images. As was so often the case, those who had originally learnt through such imagery were being taught to reject it. While certain of the necessity for such action Karlstadt was riven by fear of the consequences. In his tract on images written in 1522, Karlstadt states: “My heart since childhood has been brought up in the veneration of images and a harmful fear has



“Idolatry”, according to Carlos Eire, “is a fighting word”; it carries within itself a concept of what is true and what is false. In this period, uttered with reformist zeal, the very word inspired conflict; the object of such a description was by its nature wrong and evil and needed to be cast out.<sup>22</sup>

Both Karlstadt and Luther acknowledged the need for reform but their approaches differed; an ideological battle took place between the erstwhile colleagues. Karlstadt forced the issue of externals and made iconoclasm a ‘work’ necessary for salvation.<sup>23</sup> Luther, seen in Cranach the Elder’s portrait of 1543 (fig.14), in his turn believed that faith and salvation were works of the heart, and *that* was important, for it was in the heart where the change should take place. “Tear [such ideas] out of the heart through God’s word”, he writes, for when they no longer remain in the heart “they can do no harm when seen with the eyes.”<sup>24</sup>

According to Luther, the Mosaic proscription found in the First Commandment applied only to an image of God that was worshipped, not to images and statues made without idolatry.<sup>25</sup> He believed that a prohibition on images, like the Sabbath regulations and other ceremonies of Judaism, applied only to those bound by the Law of Moses and that these had been abrogated by the New Covenant.<sup>26</sup> Luther thought it a good thing to destroy images, if they had become objects of idolatry, but he did not want to make iconoclasm a strict demand for all Christians because he could see the difficulties this would involve.<sup>27</sup> His religion was a religion of words, not images, but it became that way almost by stealth. A doctrine of salvation based on faith alone (*sola fides*) came to Luther around 1615, as he worked on a series of lectures on Paul’s Letter to the Romans Chapter 3. Faith, he wrote, was effected in the sinner by means of the Word.

A reliance on the words ‘faith alone’ was contested by Catholic opponents, who accused Luther of adding the word ‘alone’ (*allein*) to his translation of Romans:

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entered me which I would gladly rid myself of and cannot” (Andreas Karlstadt quoted in Dyrness, 53, 91).

<sup>22</sup> Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 6.

<sup>23</sup> Eire, 70.

<sup>24</sup> Eire, 70.

<sup>25</sup> *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 40, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Press, 1955 ): 85.

<sup>26</sup> Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 71.

<sup>27</sup> Luther was fully aware of the damaging effects of a wholesale demolition of religious objects: “And you rush, create an uproar break down their altars and overthrow images! Do you really believe you can abolish the altars this way? No, you will only set them up more firmly.” Martin Luther, “Third Sermon after Invocavit, 1522”, in Doberstein, ed. *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 51 (Philadelphia: Muhlenburgh Press, 1959): 83.

3:28.<sup>28</sup> The accepted translation reads: “As we see it a man is justified by faith and not by doing something the Law tells him to do.”<sup>29</sup> In a famous *Letter on Translation* (1530), Luther defended this addition arguing that it conveyed in the German of his day what the Greek and Latin Bibles really meant, although he did admit that the word *sola* was not there.<sup>30</sup>

## The place of the image in early reformed thought

Despite his pivotal role in the religious upheaval of the times, Luther was, compared to other Protestant Reformers, remarkably tolerant of religious images; large altarpieces were common in Lutheran churches.<sup>31</sup> But they were altarpieces with a difference. They bristled with quotations and bustled with ministers and believers. Arguably the most important of these was Cranach’s *Wittenberg Altarpiece* (fig.15), with its central panel of *The Lord’s Supper* flanked by *Baptism* to its right and *Confession* to its left. Below the altarpiece, the predella shows the central crucifix standing distanced in space between the preaching Luther and his attentive listeners (fig.16). This altarpiece, states Joseph Koerner, maps the parishioner’s path to the altar. Through Baptism they are cleansed from original sin, through Confession, which in 1547 had been made a pre-requisite for Communion for it prevented active sinners from coming to the table, they were free to approach the Communion table itself.<sup>32</sup> The Virgin Mary had no place in these large works. In Dinkelsbühl, Southern Germany, a painting of the Last Supper with the words of the biblical text beneath was thought to have been deliberately placed to block the view to the choir where a late fifteenth-century altarpiece of the Virgin Mary still stands.<sup>33</sup> What was important to Luther was the instructional use of images and not their devotional function. While visual images were ‘external’ and therefore permitted by Christian freedom, Luther defended their use mainly for the sake of “the children and the physically weak.”<sup>34</sup>

But Luther could see the worth in images for proselytising. His long-time friend, the artist Lucas Cranach (1472-1573), gave Luther’s words wings. From late in the

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<sup>28</sup> Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image*, 20.

<sup>29</sup> *Jerusalem Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1966): 272.

<sup>30</sup> Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image*, 21.

<sup>31</sup> Frank Burch Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste and Christian Taste: Aesthetics in Christian Life* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000): 37.

<sup>32</sup> Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image*, 334-335.

<sup>33</sup> Koerner, 289-293.

<sup>34</sup> Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste and Christian Taste*, 37.

1520s Cranach re-worked his art to the needs of a new faith.<sup>35</sup> Together with Luther himself, he designed altarpieces, panels, didactic prints and epitaphs which gave visual form not only to Luther's attacks on the papacy but also to the pronouncements of his new religion. It was Cranach who immortalised the historic Luther in the many images he made of him.

Cranach's identification as 'Luther's artist' has subsumed an important point. The art historian Andreas Tacke points out that "religious blinkers" have almost prevented two major commissions from the Cranach workshop from entering the field of Cranach research.<sup>36</sup> The Saints and Passion Cycle (1519-20 and 1523-25), made for Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg, and another cycle painted for Prince Joachim of Brandenburg, were regarded as 'extremely' dangerous by the Wittenberg Reformers. Cranach painted Cardinal Albrecht several times – as St. Jerome in which he included the motifs of the saint, an image of the Virgin Mary and a crucifix (*Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg as St. Jerome in his Study*, 1526) (fig.17). He made another of Albrecht kneeling before the cross (*Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg before the Crucified Christ*, c.1520-1530) (fig.18). It is notable that Cranach painted the bishop before the same type of crucifix that was later used as a model for Luther's cross. The crucified Christ figure with a flying loincloth appears to have been a generic figure rather than one that implied a specific religious orientation. At the same time as Cranach's workshop was providing vilifying, visual rhetoric for Luther's cause, a stream of commissions was being undertaken for work for the 'Old Believers'(Catholics). It was these works, numbering over 300 separate paintings, which have been given little attention within Cranach literature – possibly because they did not fit preconceived expectations for 'Luther's artist.'<sup>37</sup> Cranach continued also to paint images of the Virgin. Some of these works, for example *Virgin under the Apple Tree* (1520-30) (fig.19) had obvious associations with the Virgin identified as the 'New Eve' and its concomitant Catholic theological beliefs. It was, however, the images of the heart that Luther insisted had to be replaced, not outward images.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Lucas Cranach developed a close friendship with Martin Luther. From the very beginning he used his talents to shape the public image of the reformer in both prints and painted works. A canon of preferred pictorial subjects emerged slowly. It was Cranach who devised suitable artistic formulations to accompany Luther's tracts – many of them vitriolic attacks on the Catholics. Andreas Tacke "With Cranach's Help: Counter-Reformation art before the Council of Trent" in Bodo Brinkman, ed. *Cranach* (London: Royal Academy Publications, 2008): 85.

<sup>36</sup> Tacke, 81.

<sup>37</sup> Tacke, 81-89.

<sup>38</sup> Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste and Christian Taste*, 122

Words became the new images in the generally anonymous altarpieces which consisted simply of the Ten Commandments inscribed in text (fig.20). It was not just ‘word’ pictures alone which replaced Catholic imagery. Evangelical church space became visibly saturated with words, most commonly combined with pictures since, in appropriating Catholic imagery, Lutherans could at the same time submit the old images to condemnation and ridicule as Cranach does in his *Christ Crowned with Thorns and the Pope Crowned with Gold* (fig.21).<sup>39</sup> Reformation images also represented ecclesiastical personages and activities. Church walls were covered with heroic portraits of local preachers, princes and magistrates which gave the local churches their form and protection. Cranach’s pictures of Luther were widely disseminated. He even appears as one of the apostles at the supper-table in the *Wittenberg Altarpiece*.<sup>40</sup> Viet Thim’s *Luther Triptych* (1572) (fig.22) again borrows the form of earlier religious altarpieces; here Luther is shown in varied poses in each of the three panels.<sup>41</sup>

One image, however, went to the heart of Luther’s teaching. Christ on the cross was both the exception and the rule for the place of the visual in his work. The image of God dying on the cross was indelibly inscribed in the heart, he said. In his most telling admission of the absolute necessity of the image in human imagination, Luther goes so far as to say:

I know that God desires that one should hear and read his work especially the passion of Christ. But if I am to hear and think, then it is impossible for me to not make images within my heart, for whether I want or not, when I hear the word Christ, there delineates itself in my heart, the picture of a man who hangs on the cross, just as my face naturally delineates itself on water when I look into it. If it is not a sin but a good thing that I have God’s image within my heart, why then should it be sinful to have it then before my eyes.<sup>42</sup>

Luther used a particular German verb to express this sentiment. The word *entwerfen* was used in Middle and Early High German to refer most often to a sketch, an outline or an under-drawing. Luther used this word reflexively: the picture delineates itself, *entwirft sich*. This can be translated to read as “projects itself” into the heart in the

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<sup>39</sup> Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, Christian Taste*, 62.

<sup>40</sup> Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image*, 243.

<sup>41</sup> Koerner, 159.

<sup>42</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 40, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, 99-100.

same way as “an object casts a shadow.”<sup>43</sup> Automatically, as if due to natural conditions, words generate pictures; in such a way Luther makes the inner image a spontaneous event.<sup>44</sup>

Luther struggled to come to terms with his own experience – that certain biblical text or ideas automatically evoked a mind-picture which was all but impossible to eliminate. If this were a ‘natural event’ why then would the representation of such interior images be wrong? But Luther’s understanding was irrevocably tied to his condemnation of their importance within the Catholic Church. *Sola Scriptura* became the rallying cry between rival communicative media; as Koerner succinctly puts it: “on one side was the word ... on the other side stood the image, instrument of the Roman Church’s deceit.”<sup>45</sup>

Luther’s hard line softened over time. In his third *Invocavit Sermon* (1522) he no longer condemned images entirely, he stated that images were unnecessary to faith: “we are free to have them or not although it would be better if we did not have them at all.”<sup>46</sup> They were ‘adiaphora’; matters of indifference which were neither commanded nor forbidden by God and as such were not part of the deposit of faith. A morally neutral space was thus provided in which different practices could be accommodated.<sup>47</sup>

This morally neutral space, however, did not accommodate images of the Virgin Mary, for Luther conceded that certain cult figures inspired idolatry. Effigies of the Virgin Mary and the Saints, he said, “supported the church’s false promise of intercession” and when offered as an object of donation or as an indulgenced object, they supported a false theology.<sup>48</sup> Marian icons were to become the most vilified by Protestant reformers because, carrying within them the promise of intercession, they were an affront to the one un-representable God.<sup>49</sup>

The void left by the withdrawal of Mary’s image from the pantheon of religious images was filled by scenes of the crucified Christ. Luther absorbed the image of the

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<sup>43</sup> It was generally believed at the time, that images were imprinted indelibly on the memory through the faculty of sight. See Federico Borromeo, *Sacred Painting: Museum*, ed. and trans. Kenneth S. Rothwell, Jr. (Cambridge Mass. and London: I Tatti Renaissance Library Series, 2010): xiii.

<sup>44</sup> Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image*, 161.

<sup>45</sup> Koerner, 46.

<sup>46</sup> Martin Luther, “Third Letter after *Invocavit*” 1522 in *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 51, ed. John W. Doberstein, 81.

<sup>47</sup> Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image*, 157-161.

<sup>48</sup> Martin Luther, *On Good Works* (WA V1: 24) quoted in Koerner, 27

<sup>49</sup> Koerner, 129.

cross and made it his faith-image. The cross became the point of difference between the Catholic Church and the evangelical movement for it affirmed faith in Jesus Christ alone and boasted that “Protestants would wear a new cross of religious persecution.”<sup>50</sup> Cranach’s iconic treatment of the crucified Christ, detached from a spatial setting and placed within the still air of an interior with his loin-cloth flapping in the metaphorical winds of vitality and change, was a motif inherited from early Netherlandish art, from Rogier van de Weyden in particular, shown in his *Diptych Crucifixion* (c.1460-65) (fig.23). One of Cranach the Younger’s largest canvases *Crucifix* (1571) (fig.24) shows what was to become the most familiar expression of Lutheran art, the crucifix shown against a dark background surrounded by prayers, invocations or biblical text.<sup>51</sup> The wind-tossed loin-cloth, it was said, reanimated the crucifix, showing in its turbulence, how salvation works – it projects “the historical ‘now’ of Christ’s death into a present ‘now.’”<sup>52</sup>

Although this particular vision of the crucified Christ had been subsumed into Luther’s imagery, it was by no means a generally accepted Protestant image. Paradoxically, by displaying the crucifix, it became also a sign of disagreement with the Calvinists, because, in the convoluted religious debates of the time, some Calvinists claimed that church images broke not only the Second Commandment but the eighth as well for, in showing Christ, artists falsely represented what they could not have known themselves.<sup>53</sup> It was that same image which Luther adopted as his leitmotif, the crucified Christ with the wind-tossed loin cloth, albeit in the three dimensional form of the crucifix, that the iconoclasts demolished with special relish.

John Baptist Knipping acknowledges that for many Protestants, their aversion for the image included the crucifix. It was, instead, the Catholics who honoured Christ on the Cross. It was the art of painting, Knipping argues, which in this period brought a

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<sup>50</sup> Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image*, 127.

<sup>51</sup> This form of crucifixion scene which was at the same time realistic and unrealistic became a standard visual format which could be personalised by choice of text and used for a multitude of purposes especially for epitaphs and tombstones (Koerner, 223).

Richard Viladesau explains in detail Luther’s attachment to this imagery made famous on his behalf, by Cranach’s many inclusions of the motif. See Viladesau, *The Triumph of the Cross* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 103-129.

<sup>52</sup> Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image*, 181.

<sup>53</sup> Koerner, 165.

The Second Commandment reads: Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain. The Eighth Commandment reads: Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.

new visual formula for the crucified Christ and this representation gradually became the most significant ornament of the Catholic living room.<sup>54</sup>

## A re-formed Calvin

Although it was an extension of Lutheran evangelical thought, the particular strand of reformed teaching which influenced the art of the Dutch Republic most profoundly was that of John Calvin (1509-1564). It is not known with certainty where and when Calvin may have come into contact with ‘Lutheranism’; it is thought that it was through his personal contacts and reading during his student days, particularly in Paris.<sup>55</sup> Calvin viewed his conversion from Roman Catholicism and his rejection of Catholic worship as a lifesaving moment, when he ‘softened’ his will to the will of God.<sup>56</sup> His conversion was an attack on the idolatry and corruption of all religion and the improper mixing of spiritual and material in worship.<sup>57</sup> Catholic worship, he now came to see as a corruption of the will of God. At the centre of Calvin’s teaching was the superiority of the spiritual over the material. He insisted that God is always improperly worshipped in the visual symbol: “Whatever holds down and confines the senses to the earth is contrary to the covenant with God; in which, inviting us to Himself, He permits us to think of nothing but what is spiritual”.<sup>58</sup>

Calvin’s proclamations about art were made in his “Exposition of the Decalogue”, a chapter in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), and its commentary on the Second Commandment: “You shall not make a graven image for yourself nor any likeness of things that are in heaven, or on earth beneath, or in the waters under the earth; you shall not adore or worship them.” This means, according to Calvin, that “those who are trying with miserable excuse to defend accursed idolatry that many years ago has swamped and sunk true religion should attend to this.”<sup>59</sup> Calvin’s particular concern was with representations, *counterfeystels* or portraits of God. These were an insult and the ban on such representations was written into the Heidelberg Catechism. Question 97 asks: “Should one therefore make no image at all?” The

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<sup>54</sup> John B. Knipping, *Iconography of the Counter-Reformation in the Netherlands: Heaven on Earth* Vols I-II (Leiden: A.W. Sijhoff, 1974): 284.

<sup>55</sup> Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 195.

<sup>56</sup> Eire, 196.

<sup>57</sup> Eire, 198.

<sup>58</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 11.8.17: Quoted in Eire, 201.

<sup>59</sup> John Calvin of Noyen, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), translated and annotated by Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmann Publishing, 1986): 20.

answer is given: “God can and should not be portrayed in any way; but as for creatures, although they may indeed be portrayed, God still forbids one to make or have images of them in order to worship them.”<sup>60</sup>

Surprisingly, both Calvin and later, the Calvinist Church of the Netherlands accepted some depictions of biblical subjects in both civic and domestic settings, for they could be interpreted as ‘histories’, illustrated truths from the biblical text.<sup>61</sup>

## Iconoclasm

The destructive arm of Calvin’s reformist ideals was iconoclasm. It is at Calvin’s door that Carlos Eire, a professor of religious studies, lays the responsibility for this violent and destructive compulsion for, as he says, Calvin’s Geneva became the exporting centre for the Reformed Faith in Western Europe.<sup>62</sup> Calvin excluded biblical paintings and religious sculptures from any place within his reformed theology. He was always careful to point out that painting and sculpture were, in themselves, “gifts of God” and had a legitimate use – but painting should always portray only things that can be seen, not things that cannot be seen, such as God’s majesty.<sup>63</sup> Images were not valued or encouraged, for it was the job of the believer to “image the reality of God’s work in Christ” in their own lives.<sup>64</sup>

Christ, according to Calvin, had taken his humanity with him to heaven, his presence could be found in the Spirit who now works primarily in the preached word. The physical objects surrounding the sacraments had “no intrinsic importance either aesthetically or theologically.” These trappings were to be stripped away, “the performance of the preached word enacted in the sacraments, became a unique mediation of grace and this is at the theological centre of Calvin’s cultural-aesthetic identity”.<sup>65</sup> Only the cross remained. In a ten-page section of his *Institutes* (III, viii, 1-11) Calvin describes the cross on which Christ died and with it the attendant duty to live the message of the cross out in life, “for it teaches patience, obedience, it chastises us and teaches us to rest on Christ alone.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> See Mochizuki, *The Netherlandish Image after Iconoclasm*, 133, 175.

<sup>61</sup> Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste and Christian Taste*, 37.

<sup>62</sup> Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 279.

<sup>63</sup> Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture*, 76.

<sup>64</sup> Dyrness, 83.

<sup>65</sup> Dyrness, 84.

<sup>66</sup> Dyrness, 83.



For the most radical reformers, this re-forming of faith required the destruction of images. In areas of Northern Europe and, more importantly for the focus of this thesis, in Southern German cities and in Flanders, “the history of art became the history of the image’s annihilation.”<sup>67</sup> By 1633 when Pieter Saenredam painted the interior of the famous St. Bavo’s Church in Haarlem, Calvinist idealism had been fully realised in those bare and lofty walls (fig.25).<sup>68</sup>

## The re-formation of the image

Calvinism, the dominant Reformed Church in the Dutch Republic of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, provided a critical component in the atmosphere and environment in which artists worked. Calvin’s theology articulated themes that were prominent in Dutch culture of the time. The emphasis was on the natural. In his *Heidelberg Catechism*, Question 27, he speaks of a God who “so governs all creatures that herbs and grass, rain and drought, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea all things come not by chance but by his fatherly hand.”<sup>69</sup> Naturalism became a dominant characteristic of Dutch art in this period.<sup>70</sup> But it was a crafted naturalism, because it constructed the world according to standards that were carefully conceived.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image*, 27.

<sup>68</sup> Saenredam’s pictures of Church interiors have been understood in terms of a Calvinist aesthetic. It is now recognised that he produced such works for Catholic as well as Protestant buyers. See Benjamin Kaplan, *Divided by Faith; Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe*, (Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press, 2007): 243.

<sup>69</sup> John Calvin quoted in Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture*, 199.

<sup>70</sup> Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture*, 199. For a broad perspective on naturalism in Dutch art of the period see Seymour Slive, *Dutch Painting, 1600-1800* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995): 123-224 and Alpers, *The Art of Describing; Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago : Chicago University Press, 1983).

<sup>71</sup> Dyrness, 200.

The link between physical surroundings and the nature of the artist and his art was generally interpreted as a disadvantage for Holland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. ‘Dogged diligence’ was seen to be a characteristic of the Dutch psyche. The eighteenth-century German classicist Friedrich von Schlegel (1772-1829) thought that Dutch art was characterized by coarseness, a struggle for bogus naturalism and a mannered handling of colour. He blamed the Reformation for a decline in artistic versatility and for portraiture and landscapes of technical perfection. The only exemptions he made from this judgement were Rubens and Rembrandt. See Dedaldo Carasso, “German and French Thought on Dutch Art 1775-1860” in *The Golden Age of Dutch Painting in Historical Perspective*, eds. Frans Grijzenhout and Henk Van Veen, trans. Andrew McCormick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 109-129.

See also Reindert T. Falkenburg, “Calvinism and the Emergence of Dutch Seventeenth-Century Landscape Art, A Critical Evaluation”, in Finney, ed. *Seeing Beyond the Word: Visual Arts in the Calvinist Tradition* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999) 343-368.

Whether history painting or landscapes, the importance of post-Reformation art in the Dutch republic at this time lay in the way the transcript of the external world became a deeper narrative of God's providential love and care.<sup>72</sup> Such an awareness of and dependence on nature, tied as it was to Calvinist rhetoric, took on a disquieting and volatile morality. Signs of the natural, evidenced in still life paintings, landscapes and family scenes alike, doubled as morality tales or religious imagery.<sup>73</sup> Scenes of largesse such as Pieter Claesz. *Still Life with Spinario* (1628) (fig.26), were at the same time *vanitas* images which pointed to the transience of life. Genre scenes acted as morality tales which spelt out in visual terms the 'right' way to live, or conversely, as in Jan Steen's *The Artist's Family* c.1655 (fig.27), the results of wrong choices. Kronenburg sums up this period in Dutch visual history in one short paragraph:

Thoughts of God and the Saints made way for artists and those who commissioned art works, to thoughts of self and materialism...Where Catholic artists in the middle-ages painted knights and royalty with spouses in prayerful reverence around the Madonna, the Protestant artist painted regents around the table, warriors, guards who were on watch or at war, academics who studied anatomy with a corpse and didn't see the supernatural world of faith, who saw only earthly life: the fruit, the landscape, the bull and the horse, the fete, the meal the fleet and the catch.<sup>74</sup>

These images based on nature did not entirely take over the Dutch artistic psyche. Despite the notoriety gained by the violent destruction of religious imagery, hundreds of graphic images of religious subjects were made in every medium by Protestant artists of the day.<sup>75</sup> These were, in the main, evangelising visualisations of the infamous *beeldenstorm* (the storming of the images) which took place in 1566 in both the Southern and the Northern Netherlands. It was in such image-making that Catholic ritual and belief was vilified and the sanctity of the iconoclasm upheld. In his study of Calvinist art, Tanis shows that the religio-political nature of many of the graphic works had a biting anti-Catholic thrust (figs.28, 29).

The accommodation of formerly Catholic works of art to new reformist demands seemed, in many cases, to provide little difficulty. Claesz Jansz. Visscher (1586-

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<sup>72</sup> Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture*, 212.

<sup>73</sup> For instance, the multiple strandings of whales along the coast of the Netherlands which took place in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were recorded in engravings by Anton Wierix (1577), Jan Saenredam (1602) and others and in a stained-glass window by Dirck Crabeth (1565). They incorporated "proverb, prophecy and parable in their disconcerting immensity". See Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches*, 130-142.

<sup>74</sup> J.A.F. Kronenburg, *Maria's Heerlijkheid in Nederland*, Vol.VII (Amsterdam: F.H.J. Bekker, 1914): 187.

<sup>75</sup> Tanis, "Netherlandish Reformed Traditions in the Graphic Arts, 1550-1630", 369.

1652), an Amsterdam engraver and print publisher, included in his stock a print series made by Maarten van Heemskerck (1498-1574), *Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread* (1570) (figs.30, 31), where the action is set in a Catholic Church with the priest in the background saying Mass. Only a few minor adjustments had to be made to remove objectionable motifs; he was able to turn the altar into a communion table with a plain wall behind it and he shows a minister administering communion.<sup>76</sup>

The young Calvinist artist and print-maker, Hendrik Hondius (1573-1649), for example published a series of prints made by Hendrik Golzius *Allegories of Faith* (c.1578) (figs.32, 33) in which he (Hondius) had to alter one plate to allow for Calvinist sensibilities. In the top left-hand corner of the work, the head of the Almighty has been removed so that the face of God is not shown. Only the hands remain.<sup>77</sup> The figure of the crucified Christ, displays eloquently both Lutheran and Calvinist theology. His loin-cloth flaps and a heart-shaped container, over-flowing with sacred blood, spills onto a pan from a set of scales containing the Bible and the tablets of the Commandments, indicating the importance of those basic tenets of Protestant worship, Christ's sacrifice on the cross, the Ten Commandments and the Bible.

## The ambivalence of iconography

A Calvinist, as opposed to a Lutheran perception, appeared to place a greater emphasis on the incarnation over the "word", for it offered didactic possibilities which did not conflict with Protestant sensibilities. The biblical text lent itself to art and edification. In tracing the history of images of the Virgin, Susan Karant-Nunn and Merry Wiesner Hanks note a change in the way the Virgin Mary is portrayed, beginning in the fifteenth century. She became younger, stronger, more human and closer to the centre of biblical events. The Holy Family became more like the ideal family envisioned by moralists and theologians alike, with a strong protective father, a caring, loving mother and a beautiful, obedient child.<sup>78</sup> It was the particular appeal of a recognisably more human Virgin which calmed the Protestant mind. The "word made flesh", seen in terms of nativity narrative, gradually emerged in the graphic arts and popular Dutch art of the seventeenth century for it accommodated the central

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<sup>76</sup> Veldman, "Protestantism and the Arts: Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century Netherlands", 419-420.

<sup>77</sup> Tanis, "Netherlandish Reformed Traditions", 377-380.

<sup>78</sup> Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks, *Luther on Women*, 34.

precepts of life within the Republic: it glorified home and hearth. Such representations could be used, with suitable added admonitions, to sanctify the family. Genre scenes which drew on both secular and sacred subjects developed, as Tanis describes it, “because of the Reformed tradition rather than in spite of it.”<sup>79</sup> Yet, despite the accompanying rhetoric, incarnational theology had at its very roots the person who made it possible, the Virgin Mary, and it was the Virgin Mary that Reformed tradition had most trouble in accommodating.

## A new religious imagery

The significant absence of church patronage for the arts as a result of Reformist proscriptions gave birth to a new genre of church painting which celebrated the purified walls of the Protestant Churches.<sup>80</sup> Mochizuki examines the evolution of a new Protestant art form. Reformers such as Erasmus, Zwingli and Calvin, she says, sought a return to a purer image, one that was removed from the particularity of Catholic worship and devotion and one which would restore the visual correlation between word and text. Protestant theologians may have rejected the image but, as Mochizuki points out, they were equally fearful of an empty church, for a divine presence had to be signified in some material way.<sup>81</sup> Words became the new art. They could represent God and allow a direct connection between man and God without the intercession of either priest or saint.<sup>82</sup> Words were not new in Netherlandish art. Lines of prayer or *banderoles* were often used in devotional works to stimulate prayer or to focus attention on the central event. Annunciation scenes such as Lucas van Leyden’s *Annunciation* (c.1500-1525) (fig.34) announced the heavenly invitation and Mary’s response in textual variety but Protestant church art was to become the art of the word itself. Calligraphy, as in the anonymous *Painted Panel of the Ten Commandments* in the Hervormde Kerk, Schoonhoven (c.1614-16) (fig.35) and similar biblical text filled the space where altarpieces and devotional art once stood.

Word-art was not the only art form to see a rise in popularity within this period. The importance of portraiture as a genre caused some concern in Protestant circles. Cranach’s many portraits of Luther did not appear to attract as much attention as those

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<sup>79</sup> Tanis, “Netherlandish Reformed Traditions”, 395.

<sup>80</sup> Mariët Westermann, *A Worldly Art*, 48.

<sup>81</sup> Mochizuki, *The Netherlandish Image after Iconoclasm 1655-1672*, 137.

<sup>82</sup> Mochizuki, 134.

of John Calvin and his ministers, probably because of the hard line Calvin took towards images *per se*. The presence of portraits of the evangelical leaders in the communities, at least in Zurich and Geneva, raised questions of propriety. Why was it permissible to own or have made portraits of a religious leader and not a saint? These portraits of religious leaders, it was thought, could become icons in their own right. Mary Winkler describes Calvinist acceptance and encouragement of portraiture as a paradox. On the one hand it was clearly acceptable since it records something the eye can see. On the other hand there was an awareness of the motives of some of the subjects. Vainglory and self-aggrandisement were not qualities to be encouraged within a Calvinist community.<sup>83</sup>

Outside of the churches themselves neutral genres of painting had been authorised by Calvin for use in decoration and religious teaching.<sup>84</sup> Into this category came biblical scenes such as the Conversion of the Eunuch, the Prodigal Son and Nativity narratives which could be expressed in terms of recognisable human emotions which enhanced their didactic value. In placing Rembrandt within this complex mix of political and religious loyalties, most commentators reinforce Rembrandt's perceived allegiance to Protestant thought.

Whatever the official line taken by the established Calvinist Church, in Rembrandt's time, there was a thriving market for religious history paintings, etchings and engravings. Mariët Westermann highlights Rembrandt's *The Hundred Guilder Print* (c.1642) (fig.36) as thematising a Protestant approach to religious representation. Rembrandt, she states, showed Christ as if preaching, and recorded the response of the audience to his words, from intent listening and contemplation, to argument and action.<sup>85</sup>

Rembrandt appeared to strike an unlikely path between Protestant acculturation and visual memory. Many of his biblical history paintings, most obviously those from the Old Testament, said to be favoured within Protestant teaching, could be read as sustaining a word-based theology. Research by Michael Montias affords some interesting findings. Although the percentage of Old Testament works is greater in Protestant households and New Testament works are found more often in Catholic households, the percentage of religiously-based subjects is greater in Catholic

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<sup>83</sup> Mary G. Winkler, "Calvin's Portrait: Representation, Image or Icon", in Finney, ed. *Seeing Beyond the Word* (Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999): 251.

<sup>84</sup> Westermann, *Rembrandt*, 48.

<sup>85</sup> Westermann, 48.

households than in Protestant ones. Some themes appear with greater frequency in one or other denomination. The Crucifixion, for instance, is relatively rare in Reformed households, but subjects relating to the life of Christ, such as the road to Emmaus or the woman at the well, appear to be favoured. Some ‘Catholic’ subjects such as the Annunciation and the Virgin Mary are found also in Reformed inventories.<sup>86</sup>

Volker Manuth asks an important question: is the adoption of certain biblical themes basis enough for interpreting a work as advocating a specific religious ideology?<sup>87</sup> There is, he notes, no convincing evidence that any church privileged any particular iconographic themes. The motivation behind both commission and purchaser as far as can be reconstructed had nothing to do with the denomination of the artist.<sup>88</sup> A further complicating factor is noted by Xander van Eck, who records many examples of cooperation across confessional divides.<sup>89</sup>

According to van Eck, a pre-eminence of Protestant thought in artistic output in the late seventeenth-century Dutch Republic has been overestimated. He details the survival and strength of the Catholic Church under the Protestant rule of the Dutch Republic. Not only did the Catholic Church survive but it prospered.<sup>90</sup> Valerie Hedquist notes that by 1656 Amsterdam alone had sixty-six clandestine Catholic Churches; the largest of these churches was situated in St. Anthonisbreestraat, the street in which Rembrandt lived. By 1642 the church there had grown so large that another house was purchased on the same side of the street as Rembrandt’s house. According to records as many as two thousand people gathered there to attend services.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> See John Michael Montias, “Works of Art in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam: An Analysis of Subjects and Attributions” in Freedberg and de Vries, eds. *Art in History, History in Art*, 337-348, 354-357.

<sup>87</sup> Manuth, “Denomination and Iconography”, 238.

<sup>88</sup> Manuth, 238.

<sup>89</sup> Jacob Jordaens for example, a Protestant painter painted a *Christ Carrying the Cross* (1657) for a Jesuit Church in Amsterdam. Thomas de Keyser also a non-Catholic painted two panel pictures, *The Virgin Mary* and *John the Evangelist* (1630), identified as wings for a small altarpiece for a Catholic Church in Amsterdam. See Xander Van Eck, *Clandestine Splendor*, (2007) 15,111.

<sup>90</sup> Xander van Eck, “From Doubt to Conviction: Clandestine Catholic Churches as Patrons of Dutch Caravaggesque Painting”, *Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, 22.1 (1993-94): 217.

<sup>91</sup> Valerie Lind Hedquist, “Rembrandt and the Franciscans of Amsterdam”, *Dutch Crossing* 18.1 (1994): 27.

## The difficulties of distinction

Religious affiliation at this stage in the history of the Dutch Republic was difficult to define. The imposition of the Calvinist faith as the established church was essentially a political move, used to amalgamate and unify various grievances which had as their central focus a reformation of the political structure of the country. Theological polarisation strengthened political polarisation, in that it granted ideological justification to the party striving for hegemony.<sup>92</sup>

Calvinism appears to have been used by the opposition as a weapon against the Spanish monarchy.<sup>93</sup> Simon Schama states the position succinctly: “If Calvinists alone could not have made the Republic, the Republic could certainly not have been made without the Calvinists”. It was, he says, “their militant iconoclasm that first bunched a fist in the face of Counter-Reformation Spain.”<sup>94</sup>

Political reformation as an event in time can be pin-pointed fairly accurately, but the process of changing confessional identities was relatively slow, often taking more than a generation.<sup>95</sup> The fluid confessional boundaries between Protestant and Catholic in the Northern Netherlands remained that way for many years; if the authority changed, so often did the religion, but that change was generally one of political directive rather than a matter of faith.<sup>96</sup> Seen through the eyes of the historian, the religious question was often one of pragmatism; lip-service was played to Calvinism but the trade interests of the merchant elite, who ruled the cities and eventually the state, were of greater importance. The Dutch Republic was notorious among contemporaries for the wide number of beliefs and practices it permitted. Such a degree of tolerance was viewed at the time as a sign of moral degeneracy. Only subsequently has it been re-viewed as one of its most admirable traits.<sup>97</sup>

Within the Dutch Republic politics and religion were inter-dependent. The religious upheavals which initiated new evangelizing art were inextricably entwined

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<sup>92</sup> Joke Spaans, “Catholicism and Resistance to the Reformation in the Netherlands” in Philip Benedict, Guido Marnef, Henk van Nierop, Marc Venard, eds. *Reformation, Revolution and Civil War in France and the Netherlands 1555-158*. (Amsterdam: Greengrass, 1999): 18.

<sup>93</sup> Spaans, 8.

<sup>94</sup> Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches*, 59.

<sup>95</sup> Spaans, “Catholicism and Resistance”, 4.

<sup>96</sup> Spaans, 19.

See also Joke Spaans, “Religious Policies in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republic”, in Ronnie Po-chia Hsia and Henk van Nierop, eds. *Calvinism and Religious Toleration in the Dutch Golden Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 72-86.

<sup>97</sup> J. L. Price, *The Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Macmillan, 1998): 86.

with and exacerbated by the political situation. The fall of Antwerp to the Spanish forces under the leadership of Alexander Farnese in 1585 effectively over-turned the importance of Antwerp as a centre for art and trade. Protestants were given two years to become reconciled to the Catholic faith or leave the country.

By the time of the Twelve Years Truce (1609-1621), a greater percentage of artists living in Amsterdam were former Flemings and the locus of Calvinist artistic activity had moved from South to North.<sup>98</sup> James Tanis points out the difficulties in distinguishing difference between the Calvinist orthodoxy imported from the South and the Northern Reformed position.<sup>99</sup> The ambiguity is best summed up by Gary Schwartz who states: “Outside the hard dogmatic core of each part however, no matter what their church, people tended towards middle-of-the-road religiousness with elements of all the prevailing religions, in varying mixtures.”<sup>100</sup>

For those who took their religion seriously the figure that marked the divide between two extremes of religious belief was the person of the Virgin Mary. The Catholic Church continued to grant her a place beside her Son as Mother and mediator; within the theology of the Reformed Church she had become simply a virtuous woman neither more nor less meritorious than any other woman.

## The place of the Virgin Mary in a reformed world

Oh Blessed Virgin, Mother of God, you were nothing and all despised yet God in His Grace regarded you and worked such great things in you. You are worthy of none of them, but the rich and abundant grace of God was upon you, far above any merits of yours.<sup>101</sup>

Luther’s prayer sums up the paradigm which was to define the Virgin Mary’s presence within Reformed belief: she was a good woman but undeserving; only God’s grace elevated her to a place above the human. From this lowered but still respectful status she was to become the figure who defined the difference between Catholic superstition and Reformed essentialism.

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<sup>98</sup> Tanis, “Netherlandish Reformed Tradition in the Graphic Arts”, 385.

On this point see also: Seymour Slive “Notes on the Relationship of Protestantism to Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting”, 3-10.

<sup>99</sup> Tanis, 388.

<sup>100</sup> Gary Schwartz, *Rembrandt: His Life, His Paintings* (London: Penguin, 1985): 14.

<sup>101</sup> Martin Luther, “Essays on the Magnificat” in *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 21 (St. Louis: Concordia Press, 1955ff): 322.



The place of Mary in Luther's new world-view accorded with his overriding principle of *sola fides*, it involved solely her faith. The scriptural account of Mary's response to the angel who came to her at the Annunciation to invite her to become the human mother of the son of God reveals the essence of that faith. She accepted that she, a Virgin, could conceive through the power of the angel's word and would remain an "uncorrupted Virgin."<sup>102</sup>

In a sermon preached in 1532, Luther speaks of the words of the angel "fear not Mary, you have found grace with God" (Luke 1:31). He uses these words to make his case against "the pope and his monks ... who make a God out of the Virgin Mary." Grace, according to Luther, comes only from God through Christ and "neither Mary nor any other person could dispense grace", which he thought was implied by the words *gratia plena* (full of grace).<sup>103</sup> Such a principle stood in direct opposition to the Catholic view, which presented Mary as the mediatrix of all grace.

According to Beth Kreitzer's study of sixteenth-century Lutheran sermons on the subject of the Virgin Mary, the thread that ran through any discussion of the Annunciation was a critique of the Catholic usage of the *Ave Maria* (Hail Mary) and the words *gratia plena* which follow it.<sup>104</sup> Mary's greatness and importance was realised not through *her* act but through the great gift given to her and through her in turn to believers.<sup>105</sup> The whole tenor of the approach to Mary is changed in Lutheran thought: she is not powerful in herself but is chosen and blessed by God without any action on her part; she cannot help petitioners, for even her sinlessness is a gift of God's grace.<sup>106</sup>

Luther's most important writing on the subject of the Virgin Mary is found in his *Commentary on the Magnificat* (1520-1521). He dedicated this article to Prince John Frederick, Duke of Saxony (1503-1554), in gratitude for his intervention on Luther's behalf with Frederick the Wise after a confrontation at Worms had resulted in

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<sup>102</sup> Luther maintained his belief in Mary's perpetual virginity all his life, considering it an article of faith. WA 11, 319. Beth Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary: Changing Images of the Virgin in Lutheran Sermons of the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): 33.

<sup>103</sup> Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary*, 31.

<sup>104</sup> The Ave Maria (Hail Mary) is the central prayer in the recitation of the rosary. It reads: Hail Mary full of grace (*gratia plena*), the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.

It was the second part of this prayer where Mary is invoked as intercessor that invited reformist censure.

<sup>105</sup> Kreitzer, 33.

<sup>106</sup> Kreitzer, 33.

Luther's banishment from the Empire. It provided him with the opportunity to enunciate strong views on some aspects of contemporary religious attitudes and devotion.<sup>107</sup> He criticises the Old (Catholic) Church for its externalism and its religious practice. He points out that what is to be wondered at about the Virgin Mary is solely her faith; she attributes all to God and maintains herself in total humility not seeing herself as above anyone else.<sup>108</sup> His views are forceful. The Virgin Mary is not a great lady, nor is she one who merits anything: she does not merit but receives: "For of a truth, she did not lie when she herself acknowledged her unworthiness and nothingness which God regarded, not because of any merit in her but solely by reason of his grace."<sup>109</sup>

## Mary as role-model

According to Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks one of the striking observations to be made about Luther's views on Mary is that he rarely uses her to say something specifically to or about women. He uses her as a model of faith for both women and men, as an example of lowliness, humility and modesty appropriate to both sexes.<sup>110</sup> That constraint is less noticeable in some of his ministers. Several preachers of the time take Mary's humble and acquiescent image even further; they make her a role-model for women. Christoph Vischer (d.1597), head pastor in Halberstadt, states that Mary was not found by the angel "in a beer or wine garden but rather she was found at home in her little chamber, occupied in earnest prayer to God."<sup>111</sup>

Mary's example set standards for female behaviour: loose women were a danger to society and threatened the fabric of community: "Beware of well-travelled young women and un-travelled young men." This was a phrase, according to Kreitzer, often found repeated in sermons for the Visitation.<sup>112</sup> Mary's faith was something that Lutheran pastors were anxious to instil into their congregations. Where women were called on to be as Mary was, theologically humble and passive, sexually chaste and

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<sup>107</sup> Donal Flanagan, *Luther on the Magnificat* (Surrey: Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 2001): 2. For a broader analysis of the place of this commentary in Luther's theological writings see: Timothy Masche, Franz Posset and Joan Skocir, eds. *Ad fontes Lutheri: Towards the recovery of the Real Luther* (Canterbury: Marquette University Press, 2001).

<sup>108</sup> Pelikan, ed. *Luther's Works*, Vol. 21, 308, 309.

<sup>109</sup> Pelikan, ed. *Luther's Works*, Vol. 21: 322.

<sup>110</sup> Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks, *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook*, 34.

<sup>111</sup> Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary*, 43.

<sup>112</sup> Christoph Vischer, *Auflegung der Euangelien Vom Aduent bis auff Ostern* (1570) n.p. Quoted in Kreitzer, 43.

domesticated, men were encouraged only to emulate Mary's faith. Mary was the ideal woman because domesticity was both theologically correct and culturally desirable.<sup>113</sup>

From allying Mary so closely to the domestic lives of women and depriving her of supernatural status, it was a short move to "implying, then openly stating" that Mary was a sinful human being no better than the rest of us.<sup>114</sup> Luther's "re-found" gospel diminished the importance of the Virgin Mary in the lives of the faithful; by the middle of the fifteenth century, few preachers devoted more than a phrase or two to her in their sermons.<sup>115</sup> At the end of the sixteenth century, in Germany at least, the pious mother of Christ came increasingly to be used as a critique of the Roman Church. As Mary herself had erred, so too the church can err: *Quod si erravit Maria. Ergo et Ecclesia potest errare.*<sup>116</sup>

For Calvin, in the subsequent generation, all prayer to Mary was contrary to scripture and to ask her to obtain grace for us was an "execrable blasphemy" for, and here his controversial theology of predestination comes into play, "God has predetermined the measure of grace for every person from all eternity."<sup>117</sup> With the exception of the Mass itself, no aspect of Catholic belief aroused the ire of the Reformers more than the mediatorial role which the Catholic Church allowed to both the Virgin Mary and the saints. They saw this role as blasphemous and demanded its abolition.<sup>118</sup> Respect for the place of the Virgin in the history of salvation dwindled. In the eyes of the preachers she became a subject for ridicule. A dissident theologian, Pieter Florisz., describes the Virgin as nothing more than a sack which had contained cinnamon and retained its sweet fragrance.<sup>119</sup> In a Catholic broadsheet printed around 1530, the anonymous writer repeats some of the doubts the reformers raised about the propriety of invoking the Virgin since "Mary is no more respected than a milkmaid

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<sup>113</sup> Kreitzer, 43.

For a broad examination of a virtuous expectation for women within a Calvinist world see Yvonne Bleyerveld, "Chaste, Obedient and Devout: biblical women as patterns of virtue in Netherlandish and German graphic art, c.1500-1750", *Simiolus* 28.4 (2000-2001): 219-250.

<sup>114</sup> Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary*, 44. See also Bleyerveld, 219-250.

<sup>115</sup> Kreitzer, 45.

<sup>116</sup> Leonhard Culman, *Sacre Contiones* (1550), 65r, Quoted in Kreitzer, 91.

<sup>117</sup> Giovanni. Miegge and Waldo Smith, *The Virgin Mary, Roman Catholic Marian Devotion* (London: Lutterworth, 1955): 67.

<sup>118</sup> Alastair Duke, *Reformation and Revolt in the Low Countries* (London: Hambledon Press, 1990): 41-42.

<sup>119</sup> ORA Gouda, 146, fo. 45v quoted in Duke, 70.

and a sack of pepper without any pepper and as a lantern without a candle as the Lutherans say.”<sup>120</sup>

Identified by Calvin as fully human and therefore capable of sin herself, it was a short step for the Virgin and her place in Catholic belief and devotion to become the object of ridicule and destruction by the iconoclasts. From the exalted centre of an artistic and devotional cult, the image of the Virgin was subsumed into the ordinary.

While the Virgin was demoted in official Reformed teaching and public worship she maintained an important place in popular and private piety. This was presumably so within the Catholic world but it appears also to be the case in some Reformed households. Montias notes that within the inventories of what he judges to be Reformed households, there are many instances when a picture of the Virgin is noted. Prohibitions against the cult of the Virgin Mary appeared to be widely ignored.<sup>121</sup>

It needs to be remembered that the polarity of approach taken by the Reformers in their attitudes to the position of the Virgin Mary in the life of the church was not absolute; there were some points held in common both with each other and with the Catholic Church itself. The Protestant critique of Catholicism embraced a wide range of views from Luther’s more conservative reforms to the iconoclastic fervour of Andreas Karlstadt and John Calvin.<sup>122</sup>

All his life Luther believed in Mary’s perpetual virginity and, although he rejected the Immaculate Conception, he continued to accept that, from the time she conceived Jesus, Mary was without sin.<sup>123</sup> Calvin accepted Mary’s perpetual virginity but rejected most devotion to her on the grounds that such beliefs show only the limitations of the believer in maintaining beliefs based on speculation rather than scripture.<sup>124</sup> The continental Reformers, although they differed in their approach, were at one in condemning the idea of Mary as mediator and subordinating all Mariology to

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<sup>120</sup> Oud-Archief Hoorn, 5, quoted in Duke, 70.

<sup>121</sup> For instance, an elder of the Dordrecht Reformed Council (on several occasions from 1618-50) Lambrecht Hulsthout, owned a panel of Mary and another of the Annunciation. An inventory made in 1685 of the contents of the home of Abraham Heijblom a wealthy member of ‘The Forty’ who must have been at least nominally Protestant, had several pictures of the Virgin and more surprisingly a picture of a nun and one of a *klopje* (holy women who took vows of chastity but not obedience and operated independently of the official church while helping priests and doing good works). Whether the presence of such works represented a particular devotion to the subject or were merely inherited family possessions is not known. See John Loughman and John Michael Montias, *Public and Private Spaces: Works of Art in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Houses* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2000): 48, 99.

<sup>122</sup> Donna Spivey Ellington, *From Sacred Body to Angelic Soul: Understanding Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Washington D.C: Catholic University of America, 2001): 155.

<sup>123</sup> The term ‘Immaculate Conception’ when applied to the Virgin Mary, means that the Virgin herself was born without sin.

<sup>124</sup> Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 9.

Christology.<sup>125</sup> They agreed on the title of Mary as *Theotokos* (bearer of God), on her virginity at the time of Christ's conception and, despite some reservations about this point on Calvin's part, on her sinlessness.<sup>126</sup>

By the seventeenth century, George Tavad finds, "Protestant orthodoxy and the pietistic movement paid little attention to Mary."<sup>127</sup> The art of the Madonna had largely been destroyed in the *beeldstormen* (the iconoclasm in the Dutch Republic).<sup>128</sup> According to Kronenburg, it became inevitable that, as the spirit of the Reformation became more distanced from the Mother of God, the *beeldende kunsten* (the faithful representation of what was happening in the soul of man) would show itself in a very different way.<sup>129</sup> Only the Catholic Church in a more restrained Post-Tridentine manner, continued to give Mary an honoured place in doctrine, worship and art.<sup>130</sup>

## Conclusion

The results of the iconoclasm and the subsequent pronouncements of various church leaders had a considerable and permanent effect on the art of the times. Art, like religious points of view, became polarised, but distinctive religious art was found only at the extremes. According to Mochizuki, the results of the iconoclasm on church decoration in the Netherlands were twofold. Within the Protestant world there was a shift of devotional art from the church to predominantly secular institutions and private houses, but there was also a spillage of text paintings into private houses as part of a diffusion of a new ideal.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Mariology is that branch of theology that focuses on the person and role of the Virgin Mary.

<sup>126</sup> George H. Tavad, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1996): 126. The attribution of the title *Theotokos* (the God-bearer) to the Virgin Mary was finally bestowed at the Council of Ephesus (431). It was the final result from a hard-fought theological battle between representatives of disparate orthodox churches some of whom saw the Virgin Mary as bearer of God and others who saw her as bearer only of the human Christ. See also Miri Rubin, *Mother of God, A History of the Virgin Mary* (London: Allen Lane, 2009): 43-49.

<sup>127</sup> Tavad, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary*, 128.

<sup>128</sup> The Iconoclasm began in Leiden on a single day. Following similar events throughout the Dutch Republic, on 26 August 1656 churches were entered and stripped. See Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book*, 44.

<sup>129</sup> Kronenburg, 187-189.

<sup>130</sup> The Council of Trent was convoked by Pope Paul III to answer Reformist accusations which led to the Reformation, and to define church doctrine on all disputed points. It began in 1545 and ended in 1563. In its last session 3-4 December 1563, the Council defined the role assigned to the arts. Religious imagery was admitted and accepted as a support to religious teaching. Norman P. Tanner, ed. *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Vol. II, *Trent to Vatican II* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1990): 774.

<sup>131</sup> Mia M. Mochizuki "At Home with the Ten Commandments: Domestic Text Paintings in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam" in Amy Golahny, Mia Mochizuki, Lisa Vergara, eds. *In his Milieu: Essays on Netherlandish Art in Memory of John Michael Montias* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University

A new art form which meditated on the stripped interiors of formerly Catholic Churches formed a genre of its own. Paintings which were composed entirely of printed text or which included printed text within the image formed a distinctly post-reformation style of decoration, deeply rooted in the ideals of the Dutch Reformed Church.<sup>132</sup> A developing visual culture reflected both the negative theological principle of Protestantism: that there can be no “likeness or agreement” between God and any physical thing and the positive theological principles; it began to depend more on the structure of Scripture itself, in the words that now formed the visual signs of his presence within their assemblies.<sup>133</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum, art made for the clandestine Catholic churches took on a more intense and emotional stance. Van Eck has shown that the art made for these ‘hidden’ churches followed the exhortations of the Council of Trent (1548-1563).<sup>134</sup> Called to reform the Catholic Church following Luther’s break with Rome, the Council required that Counter-Reformation art maintain a stricter focus on the central tenets of Catholicism. There was an emphasis on articles of faith and on specifically Catholic forms of worship such as confession, the altar, the sacrament of the Eucharist, the worship of the Virgin and the veneration of saints and angels.<sup>135</sup> Thus, the art of the Counter-Reformation defended all the dogmas attacked by the Protestants.<sup>136</sup>

There was also the art of vindication and vitriol. Catholics and Protestants alike did battle by defacing and disfiguring each other’s representations.<sup>137</sup> The *Passional Christi und Antichristi* published in Wittenberg in March 1521 included thirteen pairs of woodcuts designed by Cranach the Elder which vilified the Pope and the Church of Rome (fig.37).<sup>138</sup> But the Catholics were not blameless. They too printed images of infamy including the *Seven-headed Martin Luther* (1529) attributed to Hans Brosamer (fig.38).<sup>139</sup> Such art clearly represented polarised religious views.

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Press, 2006): 289. Montias’ database shows that such paintings were owned across the confessional divide including by Catholics.

<sup>132</sup> Mochizuki, *At Home with the Ten Commandments*, 289.

<sup>133</sup> Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture*, 187.

<sup>134</sup> Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 774.

<sup>135</sup> Van Eck, *Clandestine Splendor*, 14.

<sup>136</sup> Emile Mâle, *Religious Art: From the Twelfth to the Eighteenth Century* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982): 168.

<sup>137</sup> Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image*, 114.

<sup>138</sup> Koerner, 119.

<sup>139</sup> Koerner, 115-116.

In so far as formal categories of art were concerned, there were distinct and recognisable forms of art which evolved to suit the needs of both Reformed and Catholic beliefs and their various congregations. Such art took an obviously partial approach. Rembrandt's religious art was not, as far as we know, made in sympathy with either cause. His art filled an intermediate space, the space made for private devotion, for aesthetic gratification and even for personal acquisition. Only a study of the iconography of his biblical works and an awareness of the historical and religious context of the times in which he lived can give some idea of what, if any, particular religious beliefs might form the inspiration for these works. Essential to such a study is a knowledge of how Rembrandt himself lived within the changing religious and political boundaries of the Amsterdam of his time.

## Chapter Three: Rembrandt's Personal Perspective

### Introduction

Reformed rhetoric and the art of 'utterance' – the written word as a didactic art form in its own right – shaped the wider religious world and the world of religious art in which Rembrandt lived and worked, or so scholars have claimed.<sup>1</sup> The results of recent research on the part of Van Eck, Manuth and others, however, has shown that sharp distinctions between creed and visual expression are not easy to establish.<sup>2</sup> Although the Calvinist religion was 'official' in so far as membership in that church was a requisite for any civic or official office, less than half the population subscribed to Calvinism. Amsterdam, as has been shown, was known for its tolerance of a complex mix of religious sects.<sup>3</sup>

What effect this religious mix and the various needs and proscriptions of differing religious affiliations had on Rembrandt's work can only be guessed at, for he himself left little evidence of his own thoughts or feelings. The various extant papers found in *The Rembrandt Documents*, in most cases, provide a litany of Rembrandt's interactions with the law, his patrons or his debtors.<sup>4</sup> Besides various notations

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<sup>1</sup> See in particular Koerner, *Reformation of the Image*; Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture* and Mochizuki, *The Netherlandish Image after Iconoclasm, 1566-1672*.

<sup>2</sup> Van Eck, *Clandestine Splendor*; Volker Manuth, "Denomination and Iconography." For a broad view of religious toleration in the Dutch Republic see R. Po-Chia Hsia and Henk van Nierop, eds. *Calvinism and Religious Toleration in the Dutch Golden Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), especially Joke Spaans "Religious Policies in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republic", 72-86. For a history of contemporary society in Rembrandt's age see J.L. Price, *The Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century*; Mariët Westermann, *A Worldly Art, The Dutch Republic 1585-1718*; Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches*. For the post-Reformation Catholic position in the Netherlands see Joke Spaans, "Catholicism and Resistance to the Reformation of the Netherlands", in Philip Benedict, Guido Marnef, Henk van Nierop, and Marc Venard, eds. *Reformation, Revolution and Civil War in France and the Netherlands 1555-1585*, (Amsterdam: Greengrass, 1999):149-163. For an overview of religious diversity in early modern Dutch history see Joke Spaans, "Unity and Diversity as a Theme in Early Modern Dutch Religious History: An Interpretation", *Studies in Church History* 32 (1996): 221-234.

<sup>3</sup> The estimated percentage of the Calvinist population varies from historian to historian. Mariët Westermann states that Catholics, Jews and Lutherans formed half the population (*Rembrandt*, 12). In a systematic study of the relationship between Catholic and Protestant populations in the Golden Age, Charles H. Parker states that in the lands served by the Holland mission the Catholic population rose to roughly one third of the population in 1656 dropping to almost half that number at the end of the century. See Charles H. Parker, *Faith on the Margins, Catholics and Catholicism in the Dutch Golden Age* (London: Harvard University Press, 2008): 17. Perlove and Silver give the number of Catholics in the year 1656 as 30,000 – about 20% of the population (*Rembrandt's Faith, Church and Temple in the Dutch Golden Age*, 45).

<sup>4</sup> See for example Rembrandt's clash with a patron Diego D'Andrada a "Portuguese Merchant" who commissioned a portrait of a small girl (probably his daughter) for his home. He paid Rembrandt half the agreed fee, the other half to be paid on completion. The picture was not to his liking and he laid a complaint in February 1654 at the notary's office insisting that the portrait – still unfinished "showed



inscribed on works of art and his signature on legal documents, the most important commentary that survives on his art is found in a series of seven letters written and signed by Rembrandt, concerning his commission for the *Passion Series* (1633-39) made for the Stadhouder, Frederick Hendrick.<sup>5</sup>

One particular letter to the Stadhouder, dated 12 January 1639 gives the only indication we have in Rembrandt's own words of how he approached the art of painting both stylistically and emotionally – at least for this commission. His excuse for the late delivery of two of the works for the *Passion Series* was that the pictures had been executed so as to “afford pleasure to his highness,” for in these two pictures “die meeste ende die naeteureelste beweeghelickeijt” (the greatest and most natural movement or the most innate emotion) has been sought.”<sup>6</sup>

In an earlier sentence (1634), inscribed below a picture of a bearded man, found in a visiting German's autograph book, Rembrandt writes “een vroom gemoet acht eer voor goet” (a pious mind places honour above wealth).<sup>7</sup> While this phrase may give some indication of the values that ruled Rembrandt's life, it may also be just one of those lofty inscriptions which became mottoes or, in this case, worthy inclusions in an *album amicorum*. Jessica Lane points out that this was a motto that was popular in a

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no resemblance at all to the image of the head of the young girl.” D'Andrada now wanted Rembrandt to “alter and retouch the painting before the departure of the young girl, so it will be her proper likeness.” Rembrandt refused unless the “the claimant paid him the balance due or guarantees full payment by giving security” (*Rembrandt Documents*, 310-311). See also Steven Nadler, *Rembrandt's Jews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003): 42-43.

<sup>5</sup> Although little of Rembrandt's personal correspondence has been preserved, there are around five hundred extant documents, generally legal documents or records of dealings found in other archives, which give a picture of Rembrandt and his art. Some of his contracts with his pupils have survived. Archival evidence of the presence of his work in the collections of Dutch and foreign collectors has in many cases been preserved and his fame as an artist has been attested to in more than forty contemporaneous books and manuscripts. Rembrandt's personal life is recalled mainly in documents which record his conflicted family life and his troubled financial affairs (Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book*, 13).

<sup>6</sup> For Rembrandt's seven letters seen in original form and transcribed see: Isabella H. van Eeghen, trans. Yola D. Ovink, *Seven Letters by Rembrandt* (The Hague: Boucher, 1961). For this particular letter see pp. 34-39. See also Westermann, *Rembrandt*, 21, 24. The translation of these words has been challenged. The initial translation speaks of “the greatest and most natural movement” whereas a later translation by H.E. van Gelder (1943) suggests that in the seventeenth century the word *beweeglijkheid* was used to express emotion rather than a physical movement. See van Eeghen, *Seven Letters by Rembrandt*, 39.

<sup>7</sup> This sentence was found in the *album amicorum* of Burchard Grossmann, probably one of Van Uylenburgh's customers. According to Schama, this notation was written just weeks before Rembrandt's marriage to Saskia van Uylenburgh and he might have had hopes that “this pious self-advertisement might reach her family” (Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes*, 361).

burgeoning mercantile Dutch Republic which, at the same time as it was amassing considerable wealth, was also trying to espouse Calvinist values.<sup>8</sup>

Only one notation on a series of sketches of the mourning Virgin, *The Mater Dolorosa and Other Mourners* (c.1637) provides some clue to the religious sensitivities Rembrandt might have had. Above four quick sketches of the mourning Virgin Rembrandt has written the words “een dijvoort thr(?) eesoor dat in een fijn harte bewaert wert troost harer belevende siel” (a devout treasure that is kept in one’s heart for the consolation of her compassionate soul).<sup>9</sup> These words paraphrase the words which are used to describe the Virgin in Luke’s Gospel after the visit of the shepherds to the stable: “As for Mary she treasured these things and pondered them in her heart” (Luke 2:18). They indicate some depth of understanding on Rembrandt’s part of the place of the Virgin Mary within a wider religious context and will be examined in a further chapter. As Mariët Westermann points out, although none of these documents is as effective as Rembrandt’s own art in giving life to the person of Rembrandt himself, they are essential to an understanding of his career.<sup>10</sup>

In attempting to place the artist within the context of his times, it is not only the broad perspective of social and political circumstances that is important; the private world into which Rembrandt was born and in which he lived his life, influenced as it was by that outer world, remains always the formative context for his art. Although the details of Rembrandt’s early life have been widely examined, the emphasis on particular details often directs interpretation. For the purposes of this thesis some points need to be re-established.

## A family faith

Knowledge of any formal religious belief which Rembrandt might have favoured remains elusive.<sup>11</sup> Some details of his family’s religious history can be deduced from existing documentation. Rembrandt’s mother was Catholic. His father, from a

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<sup>8</sup> Lane gives as an example of a popular motto from Rembrandt’s time, ‘Let a merchant hold fast to this precious maxim: honour before gold’. See Jessica Lane, *Rembrandt in his own Words, ‘A Pious Mind Places Honour Before Wealth’*. M.A. Thesis, University of Auckland, 2005: 2. See also Christopher Wright, *Rembrandt as an Etcher: A Study of the Artist at Work* (London: A. Zwemmer Ltd., 1969): 4.

<sup>9</sup> Wheelock and Sutton, *Rembrandt’s Late Religious Portraits*, 118.

<sup>10</sup> Westermann, *Rembrandt*, 24.

<sup>11</sup> For comprehensive accounts of Rembrandt’s life see Bob Haak, *Rembrandt: His Life, Work and Times* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969); Gary Schwartz, *Rembrandt: His Life, His Paintings*; Schama, *Rembrandt’s Eyes*; Mariët Westermann, *Rembrandt*; Gary Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book*; D.M. Field, *Rembrandt*.

Catholic family, was the only one of his siblings to convert to the Reformed faith.<sup>12</sup> This may have taken place before his marriage, for he was married in the Reformed Church.<sup>13</sup> There is no record of his conversion or of any particular Protestant confession to which he may have been attracted, although there is some evidence that his family may have had an interest in the Remonstrants.<sup>14</sup> Rembrandt's father was a man for whom religion was important. In a will dated 1 March 1600, he instructed his wife to raise their children (at this time there were only five) and any others to be born to them honourably and in fear of God throughout their minority, but he gave no indication as to the faith in which they should be brought up.<sup>15</sup>

The lack of indication as to what creed Rembrandt's father favoured may have been simply that, at that time, religious denomination mattered only in so far as it affected later civic ambition.<sup>16</sup> But the literature supplies a great deal of conflicting information. Jaap van der Veen, for instance, states that Rembrandt's parents were both Protestant and like his brothers and sisters Rembrandt himself would have been baptised in the same faith.<sup>17</sup>

## Rembrandt's documents

There is no official record of Rembrandt's birth, nor is there any documentation concerning his baptism.<sup>18</sup> He was educated at Latin School in Leiden, where strong

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<sup>12</sup> Bob Haak, *Rembrandt: His Life, Work and Times* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969):18. Schama states that both Rembrandt's father and his brother Gerrit must have outwardly conformed with the Reformed faith because they were both buried from the orthodox Reformed Church, but his mother and his mother's family remained Catholic ( Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes*, 326).

<sup>13</sup> Rembrandt's parents were married in the Pieterskerk, Leiden on 8 October 1589. His mother was buried in that church, but none of the children were baptized there. Christian Vogelaar and Gerbrand Korevar, *Rembrandt's Mother: Myth and Reality*, (Zwolle: Waanders, 2005): 12. See also Visser 't Hooft, *Rembrandt and the Gospel*, 61.

<sup>14</sup> There is evidence that Rembrandt's paternal family did not belong to the orthodox wing of the Protestant Church. Harmen's brother Adriaen's (1597-1652) family are recorded as members of a Remonstrant congregation in 1656. See A. F. de Graaf, "Remonstranten uit Leiden en omgeving", in *Rijnland, tijdschrift voor sociale genealogie en streekgeschiedenis voor Leiden en omstreken*, 9/10 (1966): 246-62 quoted in S.A.C. Dudok van Heel, "Rembrandt: His Life, His Wife, the Nursemaid and the Servant" in Julia Lloyd Williams, ed. *Rembrandt's Women* (London, New York: Prestel, 2001): 20. Adriaen's descendents however are later recorded as being overwhelmingly Catholic (Van Heel, 20).

<sup>15</sup> *Rembrandt Documents*, 38.

<sup>16</sup> Only members of the Reformed Church could hold positions in civic society. See amongst other sources, Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches*, 61.

<sup>17</sup> Jaap van der Veen, "Politics, Religion, Economy and Culture: in Lene Bógh Rónberg and Eva de la Fuente Petersen, eds. *Rembrandt? The Master and His Workshop* (Copenhagen: Statens Museum fur Kunst, 2006): 19-20.

<sup>18</sup> The *Rembrandt Documents* state that there is no official record of Rembrandt's birth. The source for information regarding the date of his birth is found only in J.J. Orler's report in the second edition of his *Beschrijvinge der Stadt Leyden*, Leiden 1641: 375. See *Rembrandt Documents*, 45.

emphasis was placed on classical languages, Reformed theology and the study of the Bible.<sup>19</sup> Students were expected to attend two church services each Sunday in the Reformed Church and were examined on their comprehension of the sermon the next day.<sup>20</sup> In 1620, at the age of fourteen, Rembrandt registered at the University of Leiden but left later that year to study painting with Jacob Isaacs van Swanenburg (1571-1638). Van Swanenburg was Catholic who was married to an Italian Catholic, and had lived in Italy for seventeen years. In 1622 Rembrandt travelled to Amsterdam to study with Pieter Lastman (1583-1633), also a Catholic, who had worked in Italy and had come under the influence of Caravaggio.<sup>21</sup> To this point Rembrandt had received a broad Reformatist, classical education at the Latin school, but the background of his formative art teachers would suggest that he was exposed to Catholic art and iconography.

Rembrandt married Saskia Uylenburgh in the Reformed St. Anna Parish on 22 June 1634.<sup>22</sup> Saskia gave birth to four children, the first three of whom died in infancy. All were baptised and buried in the Reformed church. Apart from the necessary baptisms and burials, there is no evidence that Rembrandt had any formal affiliation to that Church.<sup>23</sup> There is, instead, some evidence to the contrary. In the

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Seymour Slive notes that in the first decades of the seventeenth century when Dutch artists were creating the Golden Age, the United Provinces remained less Protestant than was commonly believed and that more artists remained Catholic than is generally known. It is difficult, he says, to assess just how many artists this applied to since a record of baptism, marriage or burial within the Reformed Church was not necessarily a proof of Protestantism. Jan Steen for example was a Catholic who was buried from the Protestant Church of St. Peter in Leiden. In some cases the place where such rites were performed was prescribed by the authorities. See Seymour Slive, "Notes on the Relationship of Protestantism to Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting", 7. Schama points out that that one of the difficulties of Calvinist doctrine was that it required the clergy to divest itself of governing authority and to invest essential matters such as the solemnization of marriage or the administration of charities to the magistracy (Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches*, 60).

<sup>19</sup> Westermann points out also that Rembrandt's education was a mark of the family's prosperity since Rembrandt, as the ninth child, would not normally have been expected to receive any formal education. The Latin School was considered the best type of schooling for the upper classes in Dutch seventeenth-century society. Admission was only granted after the skills of reading and writing had been mastered elsewhere. Latin schooling was desirable but private tutoring was considered even more superior (Westermann, *Rembrandt*, 25).

<sup>20</sup> See also Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes*, 195-207.

<sup>21</sup> *Rembrandt Documents*, 52.

<sup>22</sup> *Rembrandt Documents*, 110.

<sup>23</sup> There are only two recorded instances of Rembrandt's presence within a Reformed church. The first was the occasion of his marriage, the second was his funeral. Although the baptisms and burials of his three children are recorded, it can only be presumed that he was present on these occasions. See *The Rembrandt Documents* 153-189. Valerie Hedquist notes some of the difficulties surrounding a presumption of a religious affiliation dependent on marriage and funeral records. For Dutch Reformed couples the names were forwarded to the church in which the banns were read three times and the marriage celebrated. For Catholic couples the banns were announced at the city hall and the marriage was performed by a magistrate. These marriages were described as 'voor schepenen' (before the

matter of Rembrandt's later relationship with Hendrickje Stoffels and her subsequent pregnancy, Hendrickje was summoned before the Central Committee of the Reformed Church three times.<sup>24</sup> Rembrandt appeared only once because it was discovered that as he was not a member of the Reformed Church they had no jurisdiction over him.<sup>25</sup> The historian James Tanis is the only writer I have found who claims that Rembrandt was a confessing member of the Reformed Church, but he does not support this finding.<sup>26</sup>

Although a Protestant background is presumed since Rembrandt was married in the Reformed Church and he had his children baptised in that same faith, this is no longer as compelling as it might have seemed. His mother before him, although a Catholic, had also been married in the Reformed Church.<sup>27</sup> Xander van Eck points out a detail that is seldom mentioned in the literature. On 18 April 1580 a ruling was made: "... prediken, trouwen, doopen en andere oefeningen naar de Roomsche wyze"

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magistrate). For funerals it appears that both the Catholics and Reformed Church members could be buried in either the Nieuwe Kerk or the Oude Kerk. Catholic funerals were accompanied by the ringing of bells. Catholics preferred the Nieuwe Kerk since the cost of having the bells rung there was less than at the Oude Kerk. See Valerie Hedquist, "Dutch Genre Painting as Religious Art: Gabriel Metsu's Roman Catholic Imagery", *Art History* 31.2 (2008): 160. See also A. Th. Van Duersen, *Plain Lives in a Golden Age; Popular Culture, Religion and Society in Seventeenth-Century Holland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991): 233-319

<sup>24</sup> Hendrickje Stoffels, who was pregnant with Rembrandt's child, was summoned three times to appear before the council of the Reformed Church on a charge of 'acting like a harlot': on 25 June 1654, 2 July 1654 and 16 July 1654. Having failed to appear on those occasions she was summoned and appeared on a final occasion 23 July 1654 and admitted charges of living with Rembrandt 'like a whore'. She was admonished to penance and banned from the Lord's Supper (*Rembrandt Documents*, 318, 320).

<sup>25</sup> *Rembrandt Documents*, 318. Visser 't Hooft points out that from approximately 1633 Rembrandt appeared to be on friendly terms with the Reformed minister Sylvius who was a cousin of his wife Saskia. Sylvius acted on Saskia's behalf as a representative at the registration of her marriage to Rembrandt. He was godfather to their first child and baptised another child in 1648, shortly before his own death (Visser 't Hooft, 63).

<sup>26</sup> James R. Tanis, "Netherlandish Reformed Traditions in the Graphic Arts, 1550-1630" in Paul Corby Finney, ed. *Seeing Beyond the Word, Visual Arts in the Calvinist Tradition* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1999): 369.

<sup>27</sup> Marriage within the Lutheran and Calvinist confessions in the Dutch Republic at this time had become a 'worldly matter'. Catholics retained marriage as a sacrament but the Protestant churches placed the governance of marriage within secular hands. However, having denied the sacramental character of marriage, the Protestant confessions did not dare draw the practical consequences by relinquishing the role entirely to the state. In practice the role of marriage retained the status quo, people married as they mostly always had, in a church. Free civil marriage was temporarily introduced in the Dutch Republic at the end of the sixteenth century and the middle of the seventeenth century respectively. See Heinz Schilling, "Confessional Europe" in T.A. Brady, Heiko A. Oberman and James D. Tracey, eds. *Handbook of European History 1400-1600* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1955): 644-688. See also Van Duersen, *Plain Lives in the Golden Age: Popular Culture, Religion and Society in Seventeenth-Century Holland*, 84-95.

Visser 't Hooft points out that the Synod of Dordrecht (1618-19) decreed that persons who were 'completely estranged from the Reformed Church' were not allowed to be publicly married within a Reformed congregation. He views this as an indication that Rembrandt at least complied with those conditions (Visser 't Hooft, 62).

(Catholic services, preaching, marrying, baptizing and other practices in the Roman manner) were banned.<sup>28</sup> The Catholic Church in the United Provinces was thus divested of legal personality; it could no longer own any property, it could not perform statutory religious services; it had, in legal terms, ceased to exist.<sup>29</sup> From 1572 onwards the Reformed church had exclusive use of all church buildings which were made available for the same services provided by the old (Catholic) church: baptism, marriage and funerals. The only condition that applied was that the persons be baptised.<sup>30</sup>

With this proscription, any other services were clandestine and deprived of civil status. For a marriage to be celebrated in a church and recognised in civic society, it had to be performed within a Reformed Church. According to Van der Veen, however, a seventeenth-century Dutch citizen did not need to be affiliated with any particular congregation for use to be made of church services for baptisms, marriages and funerals. In such cases he says, one was a '*liefhebber*' – an adherent. A great number of citizens were *liefhebbbers* because they had no formal affiliation with any church.<sup>31</sup>

There is general agreement that Rembrandt was raised as a nominal Protestant. His family sympathies however, appear to lie not with the Calvinist Church but with the Remonstrant congregation.<sup>32</sup> Rembrandt himself complied with the necessary formalities for association with the Reformed Church during the time of his marriage to Saskia.

## A Mennonite Rembrandt?

As has been noted, attempts have been made to link Rembrandt with other religious denominations, most notably the Mennonites. Information that Rembrandt belonged to the Mennonite Church came from an early commentary on his life written in 1686 by Filippo Baldinucci (1635-96). Writing on knowledge supplied by a former student

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<sup>28</sup> Volker Manuth, "Denomination and Iconography: The Choice of Subject Matter in the Biblical Paintings of the Rembrandt Circle", *Simiolus* 27 (1993-94): 235.

<sup>29</sup> Van Eck, *Clandestine Splendor*, 11.

<sup>30</sup> Van Deursen, *Plain Lives in a Golden Age*, 262-263.

<sup>31</sup> Jaap van der Veen, "Politics, Religion, Economy and Culture: The Dutch Republic in the Golden Age", 19-20. See also Slive, "Notes on the Relationship of Protestantism to Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting", 3-10.

<sup>32</sup> Wheelock and Sutton, eds. *Rembrandt's Late Religious Portraits*, 23.

of Rembrandt's, the Danish painter Bernhardt Keil (1625-87), Baldinucci describes Rembrandt as professing the religion of the *Menisti*.<sup>33</sup>

Later authors have sought to elaborate on this connection. Rosenberg states that although a study of Menno Simmons' writings shows how closely Rembrandt related his biblical representations to the spiritual attitude of the sect, it would be a mistake to consider his religious art was based exclusively on that creed.<sup>34</sup> Valentiner echoes this statement; he points out that there was a close relationship between Rembrandt and the Mennonites, but he was not likely to have been a member of the church because his name does not appear on any of the church rolls which survive to this day.<sup>35</sup>

Arthur Wheelock also records Rembrandt's affinity with the Mennonites. He supplies the names of Mennonite clients whom Rembrandt painted or etched, and he suggests underlying Mennonite ideas in both Rembrandt's choice of subject and the qualities that he gives to them. He notes in particular the Mennonites' strong affiliation with the first apostolic martyrs, the subject of several of Rembrandt's late works.<sup>36</sup> Although Rembrandt maintained strong links with the Mennonite community – his first mentor Hendrick Uylenburgh with whom he lived for his first years in Amsterdam was a Mennonite as were several of Rembrandt's pupils – there is no evidence that he was ever a member of their congregation.<sup>37</sup>

It has been suggested that Rembrandt favoured ideas popular in Mennonite thought as subjects for some of his biblical paintings but an examination of the inventories of various Mennonite patrons shows that there is no foundation for claims for a particular Mennonite approach to his art.<sup>38</sup> Manuth has made a study of these claims. He shows that in inventories of goods found in Mennonite households all

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<sup>33</sup> Charles Ford, ed. *Lives of Rembrandt: Sandrart, Baldinucci and Houbraken* (London: Pallas Athene, 2007): 40.

<sup>34</sup> Rosenberg, *Rembrandt: Life and Work*, 180-183. See also Manuth, "Are You a Mennonite, Papist, Arminian or Beggar? Art, Religion and Rembrandt", 74-76.

<sup>35</sup> Valentiner, *Rembrandt and Spinoza*, 57.

<sup>36</sup> Wheelock and Sutton, *Rembrandt's Late Religious Portraits*, 22-25.

<sup>37</sup> There is documented evidence that on several occasions, 1632, 1634 and 1635, for civil or business reasons, Rembrandt gave as his address that of Hendrick Uylenburgh. Uylenburgh was also an art dealer, but it is not clear what, if any part Rembrandt took in this business (*Rembrandt Documents*, 87, 107, 116). See also Blokhuis, 23. For a comprehensive account of Uylenburgh's business as an art dealer in Amsterdam see Friso Lammertse and J. van der Veen, *Uylenburgh and Son. Art and Commerce from Rembrandt to De Lairesse 1625-1675* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2007).

<sup>38</sup> Hans Martin Rotermund argues for a Mennonite sympathy in Rembrandt's choice of biblical subject (Rotermund, "Rembrandt and the Religious Lay Movements in the Netherlands of his Time" *Nederlandsch Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 4 (1952-3): 104-192. Visser 't Hooft, spends several pages in refutation of such a conclusion. See Visser 't Hooft, *Rembrandt and the Gospel*, 22-30.

genres are represented and there appears to be no particular preference for any biblical subject.<sup>39</sup>

## Rembrandt's relationship with the Jews

The other group with whom Rembrandt was thought to have maintained strong connections was the Jewish community. Several important studies have been made of Rembrandt's relationship with his Jewish neighbours and the greater Jewish community. Steven Nadler makes a careful analysis of Rembrandt's association with the Jewish community, using it as a means to explore the tolerant setting Amsterdam provided for Jews fleeing persecution in other parts of Europe.<sup>40</sup> Frans Landsberger acknowledges the importance of Rembrandt's contribution in recording the faces and the living conditions of the Jewish community living in Amsterdam.<sup>41</sup> Landsberger believes that these faces and the way the members of the Jewish community lived their faith provided raw material for much of Rembrandt's visual exegesis, not only for his Old Testament depictions but also for those of the New Testament as well. Certainly Rembrandt's naturalism did give renewed emphasis to an important biblical qualification: that the life of Christ and his mother and his very public death took place within a Jewish context.

An awareness of Christ's 'Jewish-ness' is a constant reference point in Rembrandt's illustration of New Testament events. It is present in the detail of Jewish temple architecture and ceremony which enlivens so many of his biblical works. It is present in the dress which Rembrandt carefully articulates where it becomes a visual signifier of difference between the figures of the Old Testament and those of the New Testament.<sup>42</sup> Part of the mythology surrounding Rembrandt's reputation is that he epitomises a tolerant and sympathetic respect for the Jews.<sup>43</sup> Recent research has, however, questioned this long-held presumption.

Michael Zell, in his analysis of Eduard Kolloff's *Rembrandt's Leben und Werk, nach neuen Aktenstücken und Gesichtspunkten gelschildert* (1854), (Rembrandt's life

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<sup>39</sup> Manuth, "Are You a Mennonite, Papist, Arminian or Beggar", 74-76.

<sup>40</sup> See Nadler, *Rembrandt's Jews*.

<sup>41</sup> See Landsberger, *Rembrandt, the Jews and the Bible* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publications Society of America, 1962).

<sup>42</sup> Marieke de Winkel, *Fashion and Fancy, Dress and Meaning in Rembrandt's Paintings* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006): 252.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Zell, "Eduard Kolloff and the Historiographic Romance of Rembrandt and the Jews", *Simiolus* 28.3 (2001-2002): 191.



and work portrayed according to new documents and viewpoints), suggests that an assumption of a friendship between Rembrandt, the Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel and the local Jewish community is an essentially German version of Rembrandt's views on Jews and Judaism.<sup>44</sup> Zell states that such ideas became available to an English readership through the work of German Jewish immigrants, such as the art historians Erwin Panofsky, Carl Neumann, Walter Stechow and Landsberger who felt compelled by Nazi atrocities to extol Rembrandt's favourable attitude to the Jews.<sup>45</sup> Rosenberg provides another sympathetic source. He suggests that the Jews of Amsterdam provided Rembrandt with an "inexhaustible source for biblical types of an unprecedented verity".<sup>46</sup> Published works such as these, which suggested Rembrandt's tolerance and sympathy for the Jewish people, provided a comforting expression of empathy discerned in the work of a famous artist.<sup>47</sup>

A more critical approach is taken by Nadler. He accepts that many of Rembrandt's so-called 'Jewish' subjects have been wrongly identified: the etching *Jews in the Synagogue* (1648) (fig.39), for example, pictures a setting which bears no resemblance to the Portuguese synagogue on the Houtgracht in Amsterdam. He does, however accept that Rembrandt did paint, etch and draw Jews and Jewish settings.<sup>48</sup>

An exhibition held in 2006 at the Jewish Historical Museum Amsterdam, in 2006 to mark the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Rembrandt's birth sought to clarify the matter of Rembrandt's 'Jewish' subjects. In the subsequent catalogue, *The Jewish Rembrandt: The Myth Unravelling* (2007), three scholars from the Jewish Historical Museum, Mirjam Alexander, Jasper Hillegers and Edward van Voolen, have made an attempt to separate the myth of the 'Jewish Rembrandt' from the reality. From the eighteenth century onwards, the authors explain, ideas about Rembrandt's lifestyle and his character were increasingly tied to stereotypical ideas of both seventeenth-century and contemporary Judaism. An analysis of seventeenth-century sources shows that within inventories of the time only a "single 'Jewess' by Rembrandt is found among the

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<sup>44</sup> Eduard Kolloff (1811-79) was a German émigré living and working in Paris. He was the first to relate Rembrandt's life to recently discovered archival documentation. Kolloff published a biography of Rembrandt in 1854 and drew on the archival research of Pieter Scheltema (1812-1885) to write a work "based on new documentation and from a new point of view". See *Rembrandt Documents*, 14.

<sup>45</sup> Zell, 'Eduard Kolloff and the Historiographic Romance', 196.

<sup>46</sup> Rosenberg, *Rembrandt, Life and Work*, 197.

<sup>47</sup> Mirjam Alexander-Knotter, Jasper Hillegers, Edward van Voolen, *The Jewish Rembrandt: The Myth Unravelling* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2007): 92.

<sup>48</sup> Stephen Nadler, *Rembrandt's Jews* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003): 54-57.

effects of Gerrit van Uylenburgh in 1675".<sup>49</sup> Their careful examination of the many works identified as either particular Jews or of Jewish subjects, shows that in most cases they have little if any relationship to the named subject. There is doubt even that Rembrandt had any personal relationship with the Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel (1604-1657). The first person to identify Rembrandt's etching of 'An Unidentified Man', now known as *Samuel Menasseh ben Israel* (1636) (fig.40) was Edmé Gersaint. He identified the portrait as Menasseh ben Israel solely, it seems, on the basis that in France, Jews could be identified by a small beard.<sup>50</sup> Yet it is on the purported friendship with Menasseh that so much of the 'Jewish' Rembrandt myth is founded.<sup>51</sup>

In an afterword to this same book, Gary Schwartz goes back to a source from Rembrandt's own time. He cites a poem written by a contemporary, Hendrik Waterloos, on an impression of Rembrandt's *Hundred Guilder Print* held in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. The first two handwritten verses of the poem about Christ's grace and gifts to mankind, he says, are frequently quoted to show the artist's ideas on the subject. The third verse names the Jews as having crucified Christ and states that "his blood remains on their hands". If this was typical of the thoughts of Rembrandt's day, states Schwartz, then it would appear that tolerance for Jews was not as widespread as supposed and Rembrandt might well have shared the anti-Semitic views of his countrymen.<sup>52</sup>

Schwartz's views may be corroborated by Rembrandt himself, for he includes what would appear to be Jews, identified by the distinctive *yarmulke* (skull cap), quite subversively in several of his works. A prominently placed detractor in his grisaille work *Ecce Homo* (1634) and the following etching of the same subject *Christ before Pilate* (1636), wears a *yarmulke*.<sup>53</sup> In his 1639 etching of the *Death of the Virgin* (fig.41, 42), an onlooker to the left of the etching, stereotypically Jewish with his sharp features and hook nose, also wears a *yarmulke*. In his 1656 etching of *Christ*

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<sup>49</sup> Alexander-Knotter, Hillegers, Van Voolen, *The Jewish Rembrandt*, 89.

<sup>50</sup> The supposition that Rembrandt lived across the road from Menasseh ben Israel has also been called into question. Menasseh had an alias and it was under that name that the property across the road from Rembrandt was identified. The alias, 'Manuel Diaz', was, however, relatively common among Sephardic Jews. See Alexander Knotter, Hillegers, Van Voolen, 20. For further analysis of Rembrandt's relationship with the Jewish community see Steven Nadler, *Rembrandt's Jews* and Michael Zell, "Eduard Kolloff and the historiographic romance of Rembrandt and the Jews", 181-197.

<sup>51</sup> Alexander-Knotter, Hillegers, Van Voolen, *The Jewish Rembrandt*, 20.

<sup>52</sup> Gary Schwartz, afterword to Alexander-Knotter, Hillegers, Van Voolen, *The Jewish Rembrandt, The Myth Unravelled*, 98.

<sup>53</sup> Image sources: *Ecce Homo* (1634):Fitzwilliam Museum, <http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/dept/pdp/onlinepublications/rembrandt/RembrandtPassionHandlist.pdf>; *Christ before Pilate* (1636): Schwartz, *The Complete Etchings of Rembrandt*, B77:

*Appearing to the Apostles* (fig.43), the only person present who appears to be unaware of the post-Resurrection appearance of Christ in the Upper Room is the figure asleep in the chair on the left. He is the only person who remains ‘un-enlightened’; he too wears a *yarmulke* (fig.44).

## Rembrandt and a Catholic influence

At the edge of Rembrandt scholarship, Rembrandt’s debt to the Catholic Church emerges with a rare but tantalising recognition. Nineteenth-century art historians noted ‘Catholic’ subjects within Rembrandt’s *oeuvre* with an almost embarrassed resignation, for it ran counter to the prevailing dialectical mode. While most were happy to admit Rembrandt’s links with the Mennonites and his anecdotal links with members of the Jewish faith, few ventured into any enquiry about possible links with the Catholic Church.

Visser ’t Hooft noted Rembrandt’s interest in the Virgin Mary as a theme but attributed that interest to a sympathy for the Virgin from within the Reformed Church.<sup>54</sup> Otto Benesch recognised Rembrandt’s “almost Catholic leanings” in his late religious works. “Why”, he asks, “would an artist from a Protestant country paint such Catholic subjects as saints, monks, hermits and pilgrims?” He answers his own question by stating that the truths these pictures declare have nothing to do with confessional distinctions; they display, instead, a deep faith, which is simply Christian.<sup>55</sup>

In his turn, Kenneth Clark accepted that, at times, Rembrandt exploited the Catholic sentiment of the High Baroque with its “attendant artificialities”. He adds a disclaimer: “we must not think him insincere for doing so.”<sup>56</sup> Valentiner, writing in 1957, states that it had recently been found that Rembrandt’s mother was a Catholic and that many of her relatives were Catholic also. It is easier to understand Rembrandt’s interest in Marian themes, he argues, if we realise that his mother would have used a sixteenth-century Breviary (a book containing the daily office used in Catholic devotion), which can be seen in his portrait of his mother made in 1631

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<sup>54</sup> See Visser ’t Hooft, *Rembrandt and the Gospels*, especially page 47.

<sup>55</sup> Eva Benesch, ed. *Otto Benesch: Collected Writings*, Vol.1, *Rembrandt* (London: Phaidon, 1970): 202.

<sup>56</sup> Kenneth Clark, *Rembrandt and the Italian Renaissance* (London: John Murray, 1966): 24.

(fig.45).<sup>57</sup> This observation is clearly mistaken, for the title lines on the book the subject in this picture is reading appear to be written in a rudimentary Hebrew.<sup>58</sup>

Later commentators are less inhibited. Arthur Wheelock notes Rembrandt's connection with various religious groupings, including Catholics. He acknowledges Rembrandt's debt to the great Catholic painters, in particular to Titian and to Peter Paul Rubens. Wheelock, like most recent commentators, notes the number of remarkable 'Catholic' images among Rembrandt's works and suggests they were made for Catholic patrons.<sup>59</sup>

In a recently published examination of Rembrandt's faith, the authors Shelley Perlove and Larry Silver acknowledge a Catholic influence in the subject-matter of Rembrandt's Marian works. They argue, however, for a Calvinist interpretation of these works, in many cases dependent on marginal notes and glosses found in the *Statenbijbel* (the States Bible).<sup>60</sup> Their views will be important in an analysis of the works themselves and considered in greater depth in that context.

But a new pattern is emerging. In 1994 Valerie Lind Hedquist published an article which explored Rembrandt's relationship with the Franciscan order in Amsterdam.<sup>61</sup> The subjects of this article were the three paintings of Franciscan monks which Rembrandt made at the end of the 1650s and the beginning of the 1660s. These paintings, made at the same time as Rembrandt was painting a series of half-length religious portraits, have held an ambiguous position within Rembrandt's *oeuvre*. In 1920, Valentiner was the first to suggest that some of these paintings, the ones representing the four evangelists, the twelve apostles and Christ and the Virgin might form a series, perhaps commissioned by a church.<sup>62</sup> However, Rembrandt's three paintings of Franciscan friars, *A Franciscan Friar* (fig.46), *Monk (St. Francis?) Reading* (fig.47) and *Titus van Rijn in a Monk's Habit* (fig.48) lie outside this

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<sup>57</sup> Valentiner, *Rembrandt and Spinoza*, 47. The fact that the titles are written in Hebrew lends itself to an interpretation made by both Bauch and Tümpel that this figure is an interpretation of the Prophetess Hannah. Whether Rembrandt has used his mother for a model is unclear. See Christiaan Vogelaar, "Old Woman Reading a Book" in Christiaan Vogelaar and Gerbrand Korevaar, eds. *Rembrandt's Mother. Myth and Reality*, 110-113.

<sup>58</sup> The rudimentary Hebrew words written on the text the old lady is reading might as easily be reminiscent of a popular form of text art. Where Luther's churches were "saturated with words", evangelical texts of all types, these were sometimes written in Hebrew to emphasize the importance of the original text. See Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image*, 42.

<sup>59</sup> Wheelock and Sutton, *Rembrandt's Late Religious Portraits*, 23. See also Anat Gilboa, *Images of the Feminine in Rembrandt's Work*, 59; Williams, *Rembrandt's Women*, 165.

<sup>60</sup> Perlove and Silver, *Rembrandt's Faith*, 161-182.

<sup>61</sup> Valerie Lind Hedquist, "Rembrandt and the Franciscans in Amsterdam", 20-49.

<sup>62</sup> Albert Blankert, "The Evangelist Matthew" in Albert Blankert, ed. *Rembrandt: A Genius and his Impact*, (Zwolle: Waanders, 1998): 161-162.

hypothesis. Many attempts have been made to identify the subjects as St. Francis, an identification which would fit more comfortably within a Protestant ethos.<sup>63</sup>

Hedquist has taken these paintings outside an art historical dialectic and placed them in an historical perspective. She has identified a link between the presence of Franciscan Capuchin missionaries in Rembrandt's neighbourhood and his representations of these Franciscan friars. In a detailed analysis of archival documentation, Hedquist shows that these depictions correspond in dress to seventeenth-century illustrations of religious habits shown in Adriaen Schoonebeck's publication *Nette Afbeeldingen der Eyge Dragten van alle Geestelyke orders*.<sup>64</sup> This Dutch work, published in 1688, provided illustrations of the habits worn by various religious orders as a guide for artists who might wish to use them in their work. Here illustrations are given for the habits worn by Observant Franciscans (fig. 49) Conventual Franciscans (fig.50) and Capuchin Franciscans (fig.51). Hedquist has shown that Rembrandt's subjects are dressed in the habit of the Friars Minor Observant.<sup>65</sup> As has been previously noted, a community of these Franciscan friars lived in Rembrandt's neighbourhood, in the Sint Anthonisbreestraat. By 1635 they were saying Mass regularly in a house in the street in which Rembrandt lived and by 1641 the growing congregation had had to buy another house on the same side of the street as Rembrandt's house. The large crowds attending these Masses could not have

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<sup>63</sup> Some saints seem to have been acceptable within the Protestant world. These were to a large degree those that suggested an austere and prayerful life, saints such as Francis, Anthony and Jerome whose representations had long featured in the visual tradition. See Christian Tümpel, "Religious History Painting" in Albert Blankert, ed. *Gods, Saints and Heroes*, 45-54, 52. For Luther's proscriptions on images see: Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 66-73.

In the catalogue for exhibition *Rembrandt: A Genius and his Impact* (1997) Albert Blankert and Marleen Blokhuis describe the painting *Monk Reading (1661)* in terms of style and condition. There is some discussion about whether this painting forms part of a series of portrait paintings of saints made at this time by Rembrandt. Some note is taken of the religious habit in which Rembrandt clothes his subject – that of a Franciscan Friar but it is made in terms of whether this might identify the subject as a depiction of St. Francis not as a monk of Rembrandt's own period. See: Albert Blankert, ed. *Rembrandt: A Genius and his Impact*, 154-157.

<sup>64</sup> Hedquist, "Rembrandt and the Franciscans of Amsterdam", 20-49.

<sup>65</sup> There are three different orders of Franciscan Friars. All base their religious philosophies on the life of Saint Francis but each has a different emphasis for their mission and each wears a variation of the traditional habit. The Friars Minor Observant wear brown habits with a collar and hood. The Friars Minor Conventual wear a similar habit in black but with a longer hood and they wear a biretta, a four cornered hat, while preaching. The Capuchins, a reformed and stricter version of the Franciscans, came into being in 1628. Their habit has a long pointed hood and they wear rough robes and sandals (Hedquist, 23-24).

remained unnoticed by Rembrandt. Although the friars did not regularly wear their habits on the streets, there were occasions when they did.<sup>66</sup>

It seems unlikely that Rembrandt would not have been familiar with the habit worn by this particular order of Franciscans and Hedquist suggests that these paintings might even portray contemporary Franciscans working in Rembrandt's neighbourhood.<sup>67</sup> The fact that one of the subjects of Rembrandt's paintings of the three friars is his son Titus dressed as a friar suggests that Rembrandt was not only familiar with the monks themselves but may have had a particular affinity with them.

This scholarship appears to have received little recognition. As late as 2005, when one of these paintings: *Monk (St. Francis?) Reading* (1661) went on show in the exhibition *Rembrandt's Late Religious Portraits*, the subject was again dealt with only in terms of style, its affinity with other works of that same period and a possible identification of the subject as St. Francis.<sup>68</sup>

Hedquist's research has, however, been acknowledged by Schwartz. Schwartz includes her findings in his *The Rembrandt Book* (2006). Discussing the series of half-length portraits of the saints made by Rembrandt, he notes that the series includes one outspokenly Catholic subject. This is the painting *Titus as a Franciscan Monk*. In relation to this work, Schwartz suggests that with the dignified and obvious depiction of Catholic monks, Rembrandt pays a respect to Catholics that he does not pay to the Jews.<sup>69</sup>

Schwartz elaborates upon these comments in his afterword to *The Jewish Rembrandt: The Myth Unravelling* (2008), where he uses Hedquist's findings to state that, contrary to popular opinion, Rembrandt's street, Sint Anthonisbreestraat, housed

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<sup>66</sup> The Capuchins and the Friars Minor who followed them, were unable to wear their distinctive habits because they were working clandestinely within the Dutch Republic. They sought and were granted a dispensation to wear civilian clothing. Some Friars, thinking to test the feeling in the streets of the city, wore their habits around Amsterdam. Although they were stared at they were not confronted. The Capuchins, although having been earlier granted a dispensation to wear civilian clothing, had that dispensation revoked and by 1643 they had left the Northern Netherlands to be replaced by the other branch of the order the Friars Minor. By the time Rembrandt was painting his monks, it would have been the Friars Minor whom he was seeing in his neighbourhood. Hedquist, "Rembrandt and the Franciscans", 26-27.

<sup>67</sup> Hedquist, "Rembrandt and the Franciscans", 21

<sup>68</sup> See also Field, *Rembrandt*, 326. Simon Schama identifies this painting as *Titus as St. Francis* (1660). See Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes*, 655.

<sup>69</sup> Gary Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book*, 351-352.

far more Catholics than Jews. There were three clandestine churches in that street where thousands of Catholics attended services.<sup>70</sup>

The recent work of Perlove and Silver also acknowledges Hedquist's research. The authors note the Reformers continuing interest in St. Jerome as translator of the Bible and St. Francis as an example of "personal, spiritual contemplation" and they note Rembrandt's interest in "traditional meditating saints." They do not, however, appear to place any weight on Hedquist's findings. They see no particular reason to associate Rembrandt's paintings and prints with a Catholic audience but suggest rather that they be viewed as consistent and favourable to the dominant established religion.<sup>71</sup>

Yet despite Perlove and Silver's views, which support prevailing academic discourse, there is a wider perspective to be considered. In a dialogue which has consistently pushed for a Protestant perspective, there is a need to accommodate other views which provide a more likely explanation for some of Rembrandt's more controversial works. Hedquist suggests that some of Rembrandt's interest in subjects such as St. Jerome and St. Francis may have come from an association with the friars themselves. Rembrandt's possible relationship with the Franciscan friars becomes of more interest when his Marian paintings are analysed, for it will be seen that some of the subjects he adopts, enigmatic within the context of art historical analysis, fit within the ambit of Franciscan prayer and devotion.

It could be argued that such ideas might as easily have come to Rembrandt from the visual tradition. Emile Mâle writes of the "the religious poets with the gift of tears", the Franciscans, followers of St. Francis of Assisi, who deeply influenced the poetic and visual traditions.<sup>72</sup> It was St. Francis, a poet, author, painter and "profound Italian", according to Mâle, whose inspiration helped transform old iconography. Franciscan sensibilities compounded with a depth of emotion enabled artists to involve themselves deeply and personally in their work.<sup>73</sup> Rembrandt's religious works are of course influenced by the visual tradition, but it seems possible that such influences were reinforced by a personal acquaintance with the Franciscan order present within his neighbourhood.

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<sup>70</sup> Gary Schwartz, afterword to Alexander-Knotter, Hillegers and Van Voolen, *The Jewish Rembrandt, The Myth Unravelling*, 100.

<sup>71</sup> Perlove and Silver, 347-350.

<sup>72</sup> Emile Mâle, *Religious Art from the Twelfth to the Eighteenth Century*, 101.

<sup>73</sup> Mâle, 103-105. See also Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex* (London: Vintage, 1976), especially 179-184.

Rembrandt's possible connections to the Catholic Church have yet to be fully investigated. The historian Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia states that by 1642 there were 500 Catholic missionary priests working in the Dutch Republic. Socially, he says, Catholicism found a greater response among the elite and the rural population.<sup>74</sup> According to Hsia, Catholicism counted many adherents and converts within the intellectual elite. He names in particular the artists Frans Hals, Hendrick de Keyser and Johannes Vermeer, the poet Joost van den Vondel and the historian, Leiden professor Petrus Bertius. To this group he adds another name – that of Rembrandt van Rijn.<sup>75</sup>

The idea that Rembrandt himself may have been or had become a Catholic does not appear to have been raised elsewhere. However, the long-held presumption that Rembrandt's handling of biblical stories represents a very conscious rejection of the Catholic tradition and that he presents an iconography which is typically Protestant is now a subject for academic enquiry.<sup>76</sup> As with presumptions about Rembrandt's relationship with the Jews, such ideas may well be a product of a particular position taken initially by nineteenth- and twentieth-century historians and art historians and now accepted as fact. But time and time again, as Manuth has discovered, Rembrandt presents scenes that are "indissolubly linked with Catholic doctrine and beliefs".<sup>77</sup>

## The search for a source

In the absence of any documentation which links Rembrandt more closely with the Catholic Church itself, the search for an inspiration for Rembrandt's Marian works is found in three possibilities: his familial ties with the Catholic Church, his familiarity with the visual tradition, and an astute reading of the commercial market. According to Svetlana Alpers, Rembrandt was one of the few Dutch artists who viewed his art in

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<sup>74</sup> Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia, *The World of Catholic Renewal, 1540-1770*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 87. For a broader history of Catholicism within the Dutch Republic at this time see also Xander van Eck, *Clandestine Splendors*. 2007.

<sup>75</sup> Hsia, 87. In an email exchange with Dr. Hsia, a Professor of religious history, (28 January 2009) he states that his information comes from a study of L.J. Rogier, *Geschiedenis van het Katholicisme in Noord-Nederland in de 17e Eeuw*, 2 parts (Amsterdam, 1947). He states that one thing he (Hsia) is certain about is that "Rembrandt was not a member of the Reformed Church; nor was he a 'liebhebber' (sic) one of the circle awaiting official admission".

<sup>76</sup> Of interest on this point, is the fact that in the inventory (1640) of the art dealer Johannes de Renialme, together with a small collection of religious works many of which have the Virgin Mary as their subject, there is listed a painting by Rembrandt of a priest (no.18). This painting is not further identified but judging by the valuation of 100, it was among the most expensive pieces Renialme owned. See John Michael Montias, *Art at Auction in 17<sup>th</sup> Century Amsterdam*, 141.

<sup>77</sup> Manuth, "Are you a Mennonite, Papist, Arminian or Beggar?" 69.



terms of its place within a larger European sphere: his etchings in particular found their way into markets all over Europe.<sup>78</sup> Yet Rembrandt did not travel outside his own country. This knowledge comes from testimonial written in Latin by Constantijn Huygens (1596-1687), secretary to the Stadhouder Frederick Hendrick, in which he gives his opinion of the talents of two young Leiden artists, Rembrandt and Jan Lievens (1607-1674).<sup>79</sup>

Huygens' comments about the need for both Rembrandt and Lievens to visit Italy have been well documented. Huygens thought such a visit was necessary to size up the opposition. An acquaintance with Raphael and Michelangelo would, Huygens believed, raise the awareness of Italian artists to Dutch talent, and in turn what could be learnt would inevitably lead Rembrandt and Jan Lievens to far surpass the Italians.<sup>80</sup> Both artists refused to entertain ideas of an overseas trip on the grounds that "in the bloom of their youth, when especially an account of themselves must be given, there is no leisure time to waste in travel".<sup>81</sup> They could, explained the artists, find all they wanted in the way of inspiration within the Dutch Republic. According to Huygens' report of their conversation, "they had seen Italian paintings especially outside Italy, where there you had to track down with great inconvenience scattered about, while here they are displayed *en masse* and one can have his fill."<sup>82</sup>

Huygens' diary indicates the importance placed by contemporary connoisseurs on a knowledge of Italian art. The search for Rembrandt's sources among the work of other artists (mainly the Italians) has become an essential element in an analysis of his work. Some 'borrowings' are more obvious than others. A drawing made in 1635 of the Virgin Mary, for instance, is directly modelled on Raphael's *Madonna della Sedia*.<sup>83</sup> Only the expression on the face becomes one no longer of tranquillity, but of sadness. A copy after Leonardo's *Last Supper* (fig.52) (1635) finds its way eventually into the format for *The Oath of Claudius Civilis* (c.1661-2).<sup>84</sup> It is known that at the auction of Lucas van Uffelen's estate in April 1639, Rembrandt watched Raphael's famous portrait of *Baldassarre Castiglione* (fig.53) sell to Alphonso Lopez, a

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<sup>78</sup> Alpers, *Rembrandt's Enterprise, The Studio and the Market*, 73.

<sup>79</sup> *Rembrandt Documents*, 71-72.

<sup>80</sup> *Rembrandt Documents*, 68-72. See also Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes*, 268-269, for a contextual description of this event.

<sup>81</sup> *Rembrandt Documents*, 72.

<sup>82</sup> *Rembrandt Documents*, 72.

<sup>83</sup> Clark, *Rembrandt and the Italian Renaissance*, 47.

<sup>84</sup> Image source: Academic dictionaries and encyclopaedias, <http://en.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enwiki/7560813>

Portuguese diamond merchant. He made a quick sketch of the work and added a note at the bottom giving the price for which Raphael's portrait was sold: 3.500 guilders (fig.54).<sup>85</sup> In that same year (1639), he made an etching of himself sitting in much the same pose as Raphael's painting. The following year he made a painting of himself *Rembrandt, Self-portrait at the Age of Thirty-four* (c.1640), in which he emulated Raphael's *Castiglione* (fig.55).

Some of Rembrandt's debt lay also to his own former countrymen. His emulation of Peter Paul Rubens' altarpieces the *Raising of the Cross* (1610-11) and *Descent from the Cross* (1611-14) in his own work for the *Passion Series* is well established.<sup>86</sup> In B.P.J. Broos' *Index to the Sources of Rembrandt's Art* all records of Rembrandt's 'borrowings', as identified by various art historians, have been recorded. Almost all these sources are found in works by artists held at one time in Rembrandt's vast collection of art; only a proportion of this art was by Italian artists.<sup>87</sup>

The source for much of Rembrandt's inspiration is revealed in the inventory of his goods made by a trustee appointed by the Chamber of Insolvency on 26-27 July 1656. This inventory tells a poignant tale of extravagance, insatiable curiosity, acquisitiveness and artistic need.<sup>88</sup> The works of over sixty artists are noted in his collection of prints, drawings and paintings, as well as various pieces of sculpture and exotica. Despite the loss of these irreplaceable works, some of Rembrandt's most evocative work was made after this loss.

Alpers tempers any enthusiasm about precise sources for Rembrandt's work. She states that actual copies of older works made by Rembrandt are extremely rare within his *oeuvre*. Allowing for the few acknowledged copies of other works there are (in all around fifteen by Alpers' assessment), Rembrandt appeared to neither cultivate the practice of emulation nor hand it on to his students.<sup>89</sup> According to Alpers, Rembrandt did acknowledge his debt to previous artists, but there was something in him which refused to acknowledge any authority outside himself.<sup>90</sup> The artist Rembrandt

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<sup>85</sup> Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes*, 465.

<sup>86</sup> Image sources: Web Gallery of Art, <http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?html/r/rubens/11religi/07desce.html>

<sup>87</sup> Schwartz, ed. *B.P.J. Broos, Index to the Formal Sources of Rembrandt's Art* (Maarsen: Schwartz, 1977). For a detailed analysis of Rembrandt's debt to the Italian tradition see Kenneth Clark, *Rembrandt and the Italian Renaissance*; also *Rembrandt and the Venetian Influence, Essays by Sir Kenneth Clark, Frederick Ilchman and David Rosance* (New York: Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, 2000).

<sup>88</sup> *Rembrandt Documents*, 347-387.

<sup>89</sup> Alpers, *Rembrandt's Enterprise*, 72-73.

<sup>90</sup> Alpers, 77.

imitated most directly and encouraged his students to imitate, she states, was his second teacher, the Catholic artist Pieter Lastman. His earliest paintings show his dependence, but in his later works Lastman's influence was all but buried in Rembrandt's own originality. Rembrandt did, however, show his deep respect for Lastman by buying a final work by the artist despite being overwhelmed by his own bankruptcy.<sup>91</sup>

## Rembrandt's books

Not only does Rembrandt's inventory show the breadth of his art collection, it reveals also the meagre contents of his bookshelf. Among the many volumes of prints from a wide variety of artists, only a few actual books are mentioned. Item number 281 of the 1656 inventory notes 'fifteen books of various sizes'. Three named books are of particular importance in an assessment of Rembrandt's religious works.

Quoted often throughout Rembrandt literature is item number 284 "A Flavius Josephus in High German illustrated by Tobias Stimmer". This book is variously described in the literature as one of two volumes by Josephus, either *The Jewish War* (c.75) or *Antiquities of the Jews* (c.94). Westermann identifies this volume as *Antiquities of the Jews*, as do Wheelock and Sutton, and Schama.<sup>92</sup> Schwartz names it as a "history of the Jewish Wars against Rome".<sup>93</sup> Yet Rachel Wischnitzer, a historian from Yeshiva University, New York, states that a comparison between Rembrandt's temple illustrations and those descriptions found in Josephus' *Jewish Wars* shows little or no correlation.<sup>94</sup> Amy Golahny, in her study of Rembrandt's books, identifies the volume as a text first published by Conrad Lautenbach in Strassburg in 1574 which included all of Josephus' works.<sup>95</sup> Perlove and Silver speak of Rembrandt's interpretations of 'the histories of Josephus' which leaves a certain freedom to appeal to either text.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Alpers, 76.

<sup>92</sup> Westermann, *Rembrandt*, 134; Wheelock and Sutton, 27; Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes*, 283.

<sup>93</sup> Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book*, 138.

<sup>94</sup> In a detailed analysis of Rembrandt's representations of the Jewish Temple and the life associated with it, Wischnitzer points out that Rembrandt displays no knowledge of the detailed description Josephus gives for the vestments of a High Priest. Neither is there any co-relation between Rembrandt's treatment of the altar itself and Josephus' precise description and measurements of the altar structure or of access to that altar. See Rachael Wischnitzer, "Rembrandt, Callot and Tobias Stimmer", *Art Bulletin* 39.3 (1957): 224-230, especially page 228.

<sup>95</sup> Amy Golahny, *Rembrandt's Reading: The Artist's Bookshelf of Ancient Poetry and History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003): 164.

<sup>96</sup> Perlove and Silver, *Rembrandt's Faith*, 7.

Another title important to the analysis of Rembrandt's etchings can be found in the inventory. "All of Jerusalem", by Jacques Callot (item number 255), suggests a supportive text for Rembrandt's acknowledged 'borrowings' from Callot's work. Schwartz identifies this text more accurately. This book must have been, he says, "a second edition (1620) of *Trattato delle piante et immagini des sacri edifizii di terra sancta* (plans and images of the sacred buildings of the Holy Land) by Bernardino Amico da Gallipoli, for which Callot had made the etchings."<sup>97</sup> The surprise, says Schwartz, is that this book does not contain the illustrations of beggars which Rembrandt is known to have copied. Nor does it contain Callot's many images of the life of the Virgin, one of which, I shall later suggest, was the inspiration for Rembrandt's *Death of the Virgin* (1639). Schwartz is convinced there must have been many other books owned by Rembrandt which disappeared before the inventory was made.<sup>98</sup> But the most important text when seeking sources for Rembrandt's biblical histories is the Bible itself.

## What was the 'old Bible'?

At the heart of Rembrandt's religious art is the Bible. An 'old Bible' is registered as item number 285 in the inventory of 1656.<sup>99</sup> The only book found in his house after his death on 8 October 1669 and noted in a final inventory was a copy of the Bible.<sup>100</sup> The only information we have about what type of Bible Rembrandt might have owned is that it was 'old' which could have meant that it was an old edition or merely that it was in a dilapidated condition. There is no indication of whether the Bible listed in the initial inventory was the same Bible that was named in the final inventory; perhaps it might have even have been the one book Rembrandt was allowed to keep.

If the 'old Bible' found on Rembrandt's shelves was an old edition, it could have been any of several 'old' types, or copies available to him. According to John Durham, the Bible which Rembrandt's parents would have used would have been an edition based on an authorised translation of Jerome's Vulgate. Rembrandt might even have inherited his family Bible. Durham suggests that a possible edition might

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<sup>97</sup> Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book*, 139. See also Amy Golahny, *Rembrandt's Reading*, 81-88.

<sup>98</sup> Schwartz, 139.

<sup>99</sup> *Rembrandt Documents*, 379.

<sup>100</sup> *Rembrandt Documents*, 586.

be that of Christopher Plantin printed in 1566.<sup>101</sup> There were also Dutch versions of Luther's translation of Jerome's Vulgate which began to appear early in the sixteenth century.<sup>102</sup>

Luther's translation of the Vulgate formed a basis for another version of the Bible, the Deux-Aes Bible. This edition had more appeal to the Reformed ideal, for it was translated directly from the Greek and the translators had tried to remain as close to the original text as possible.<sup>103</sup> Whichever translation of the Bible Rembrandt had in his keeping, there must have been some inclusion of the books of the Apocrypha, for Rembrandt draws on stories from these texts for many of his iconic works. Luther included the Apocrypha in his translation, but Calvin and his followers fiercely opposed its inclusion.

The need for a new, vernacular Bible translation was the subject of much discussion in Rembrandt's time. The Synod of Dort (1618-19) was convened both to examine the theological question of predestination and to discuss the need for an authoritative translation of the Bible. The theologians present discussed at length the problem of including the Apocrypha (the Deutero-canonical books) in the proposed Bible.<sup>104</sup> The concession was made that those books would be included but printed behind the New Testament with a warning against making use of the contents. It was stipulated that lay readers had to be taught the difference between the true Word of God and books wrongly seen by others (the Catholics) as holy in their own right.<sup>105</sup>

The official *Statenbijbel* (States Bible) (fig.56), compiled by two teams of translators and made in folio size with marginal notes, was not published until 1637. It was obviously not the 'old' Bible which is listed in Rembrandt's inventory.<sup>106</sup> Perlove

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<sup>101</sup> John Durham, *The Biblical Rembrandt, Human Painter in a Landscape of Faith* (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2004): 81.

<sup>102</sup> Durham, 82. Christian Tümpel notes that among Rembrandt's books was an "old Dutch Bible (probably influenced by Luther's version)". There is no indication in the inventory that this was a Dutch Bible. See Tümpel, *Images and Metaphors*, 147.

<sup>103</sup> F.G.M. Broeyer, "Bible for the Living Room" in M. Lamberigts and A.A. Den Hollander, eds. *Lay Bibles in Europe 1450-1800*, (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2006): 208-210.

<sup>104</sup> The Synod of Dort, a general synod of the Dutch reformed Church included theologians from England, Scotland, Germany and other Northern countries. It was convened specifically to address the contentious question of predestination. Before that discussion began, there was another even more pressing item, the necessity for a new edition of the Bible. What was important was that this Bible be in Dutch rather than the usual Latin. There were two teams of translators, one for the Old Testament and one for the New Testament. The translators tried to stay as closely as possible to the original Hebrew and Greek texts. Notes and glosses were printed in the margins to give as much information as possible. Translating did not begin until 1626 and the Bible was finally released in 1637. See Broeyer, 210-212.

<sup>105</sup> Broeyer, 219.

<sup>106</sup> Broeyer, 212-215.

and Silver make the claim that their present studies reveal that Rembrandt “repeatedly consulted the Dutch States version of the Bible with its many annotations” for inspiration for his biblical works.<sup>107</sup> This of course could not have been possible for works made before 1637 and the authors make no such claims. However, their determinations for later works are arguable.

There is an inherent difficulty in basing such meticulous research on an assumption that Rembrandt used as his inspiration, a particular edition of the Bible, the *Statenbijbel*, for there is no factual evidence to support this. There is a very long list of editions of the Bible produced during the seventeenth century.<sup>108</sup> The advantage of tying Rembrandt’s inspiration to this particular biblical edition is that it allows the authors to attribute a Calvinist interpretation for any number of Rembrandt’s biblical works, but such assumptions can only be that. The large folio size, the margin comments and footnotes made the *Statenbijbel* an instant success, but the biblical historian Frits Broeyer points out other difficulties. Bibles were, in most cases, too expensive to be replaced immediately; they had sentimental value for they often remained the repository for family histories.<sup>109</sup> A standard edition of the *Statenbijbel* was not produced until 1657. Rembrandt may have had access to an earlier edition, but at the time of his insolvency (1656) the only Bible Rembrandt appeared to possess, as has been stated, was an “old Bible”.

What is obvious is that Rembrandt had access to a Bible which included the Apocrypha. If Rembrandt was using these texts accessed through the *Statenbijbel*, as Perlove and Silver claim, he was working not with Calvinist intent but in conflict with their views of religious orthodoxy for the faithful were specifically warned of the danger of taking the Apocrypha into account.

Despite her considerable research into others of the books found on Rembrandt’s bookshelf, Golahny does not investigate possible editions of the Bible. Other than commenting on various Biblical subjects which Rembrandt illustrated, her enquiry notes only that “Rembrandt read the Bible and focussed on its narratives that emphasized personal relationships, often of family and friends.”<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Perlove and Silver, *Rembrandt’s Faith*, 3.

<sup>108</sup> Broeyer, *Lay Bibles in Europe*, 214.

<sup>109</sup> Broeyer, 214.

<sup>110</sup> Golahny, *Rembrandt’s Readings*, 239.

## The Apocrypha

The importance of the Apocrypha in Rembrandt's work has been undervalued, for few art historians delve deeply into the actual texts which give substance to some of Rembrandt's biblical representations.<sup>111</sup> There is a distinction to be made between two types of Apocrypha. The Apocrypha is the name given to the extra books which are integrated into the Catholic Bible and now mainly excluded from Protestant versions of the Bible. There are also the extra-canonical texts that make up the New Testament Apocrypha, now commonly known as the 'Early Christian Apocrypha', which illustrate and expand the biblical text itself.<sup>112</sup> These do not appear in either Catholic or Protestant Bibles but have been very influential particularly on Christian art.

The word apocrypha comes from the Greek word meaning "those that have been hidden away" and refers to those scriptural texts which lie outside the biblical canon. Different denominations have different ideas of what constitutes canonical literature, and it follows that there are different versions of what texts form the Apocrypha. Within the Catholic tradition some of these extra texts are known as Deutero-Canonical (second canon) texts. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) ratified these texts and they are included within the Catholic Bible.<sup>113</sup> The Protestants generally rejected these books and continued to hold to the belief that only the books of the Hebrew Scriptures were canonical. Luther also disputed books within the New Testament. He questioned four New Testament books: those of Hebrews, James, Jude and the Book of Revelation.<sup>114</sup>

For the art historian the importance of the distinction between the Early Christian Apocrypha and the Deutero-Canonical works lies in their different values to the world of art. The Deutero-Canonical works include books detailing specific events, which have become the source for pictorial works, such as the Books of Tobit and Daniel. The Early Christian Apocrypha include gospels written in the first centuries of the

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<sup>111</sup> This dearth in scholarship has recently been partially addressed by Perlove and Silver. See Chapter Two in *Rembrandt's Faith*, 69-159 which acknowledges Rembrandt's debt to the Apocryphal texts.

<sup>112</sup> David R. Cartlidge and J. Keith Elliott, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha* (London: Routledge, 2001): 1.

<sup>113</sup> The Deutero-Canonical texts include the Books of Tobit, Judith, First and Second Maccabees, some additions to Esther, The Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) Baruch and parts of Daniel. See A. Wikgren, "Luther and the New Testament Apocrypha" in R.H. Fischer, "A Tribute to Arthur Vööbus", *Studies in Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977): 379-390.

<sup>114</sup> Wikgren, 379-390.

Christian era which are not included in the biblical text. These gospels flesh out stories from the New Testament, giving further emotional and personal content to well-known Gospel stories.<sup>115</sup>

Rembrandt draws on at least four books from the Deutero-Canonical texts, some more lavishly than others. The story of Tobit, of his blindness and of the life of his son Tobias are themes re-visited in all media in Rembrandt's works. Schama records that Tobit was one of Rembrandt's favourite stories and is recorded in at least twenty versions.<sup>116</sup> This story is not found in the Protestant Bible but is found in the Apocryphal Book of Tobit. The story of Susannah and the Elders is recorded in the Book of Daniel 13: 1-64. *Belshazzar's Feast* (1630) is found in Daniel 5: 17-30; his several sketches of *Daniel in the Lion's Den* (1645, 1655) come from Daniel 6: 17-24.<sup>117</sup> The etchings Rembrandt made for Menasseh ben Israel's *Piedra Gloriosa* (1655) come from Daniel: 31-45, *The Triumph of Mordecai* (c.1641) comes from the Book of Esther (Esther 6:1-14) and Rembrandt's various paintings and drawings of episodes from the lives of David and Bathsheba come from the Book of Samuel. Again, these passages lie outside the Protestant canon of Scripture. The attraction that such stories held for Rembrandt and his patrons, Schama claims, overcame any disapproval.<sup>118</sup>

It is on the texts of the Early Christian Apocrypha that the weight of Marian iconography depends. Rembrandt's New Testament works, those that illustrate the birth and early life of Christ and almost all the depictions of the Virgin Mary, respond in some way to these writings. It is in the text of the *Protevangelium of James* (second century AD) and not in the canonical Gospels that we find the story of the Virgin Mary's parents, Joachim and Anna. In this same text are found the stories of the childhood of the Virgin, of her betrothal and the details of the virginal birth of Christ.<sup>119</sup> The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (second century) tells of Christ's life from the age of five until the age of twelve, when he speaks with the elders in the

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<sup>115</sup> For clarity: the Apocryphal gospels are referred to with a small 'g' the canonical gospels are referred to with a capital G.

<sup>116</sup> Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes*, 238.

<sup>117</sup> Image sources: *Belshazzar's Feast* (National Gallery, London): Gary Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book*, 300; Sketches of *Daniel in the Lion's Den*: Slive, *Drawings of Rembrandt*, 188, 550; *Piedra Gloriosa* (1655, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston): Perlove and Silver, *Rembrandt's Faith*, 135; *The Triumph of Mordecai* (c.1641, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston): Schwartz, *The Complete Etchings of Rembrandt*, B40.

<sup>118</sup> Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes*, 238.

<sup>119</sup> Cartlidge and Elliott, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha*, 3.



Temple.<sup>120</sup> The *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* (eighth or ninth century) draws on both those preceding gospels and becomes the means for popularising those gospels in the West.<sup>121</sup> Another gospel, *The Dormition of Mary* (fourth century) tells various stories of the death of the Virgin Mary.<sup>122</sup>

Although Rembrandt is unlikely to have had any knowledge of the actual texts which form the early Christian Apocrypha, they came to him concisely organised in their re-telling. The pivotal religious text for the artistic tradition was the thirteenth-century work of the Dominican monk Jacobus de Voragine (c.1230-1298), *The Golden Legend*. Jacobus gathered together stories from the lives of the saints, from scripture, from the early apocryphal texts, from religious authorities and various narratives and distributed the readings according to date and liturgical season.<sup>123</sup> From *The Golden Legend* sprang most of the visualisations of those familial events in the early life of Christ and of his mother, which stand outside the Gospels themselves. The practical details of the nativity, the various stages of the flight into Egypt, the events of Christ's young life, all come from these texts as does most of what is accepted as the Virgin's life, from her Immaculate Conception to her Death, Assumption and Coronation. It is from this visual tradition, if not *The Golden Legend* itself, that Rembrandt drew for the iconography of some of his important Marian works.

## The Illustrated Bible

When discussing Rembrandt's biblical illustrations there is a tendency to concentrate on his adaptations of particular scenes based on ideas from the visual tradition or the biblical text as interpreted by Rembrandt himself. Rembrandt had another source readily available. Some of his inspiration may have come from the illustrations that formed part of the early Bibles themselves.

There had long been a tradition of Catholic Bible illustration, but illustrated Bibles are often viewed as particularly characteristic of the early Reformation period.

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<sup>120</sup> Cartlidge and Elliott, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha*, 3.

<sup>121</sup> Cartlidge and Elliott, 3.

<sup>122</sup> Cartlidge and Elliott, 5.

<sup>123</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend, Readings on the Saints*, Vol.1, trans. William Grainger Ryan (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993): 15.

Luther's early translations into German were richly illustrated.<sup>124</sup> Calvinist Bibles, on the other hand, probably because of a resistance to visual images, tended to be smaller, un-illustrated and less expensive.<sup>125</sup> When finally the *Statenbijbel*, which was to become the standard version for Dutch Calvinists, was published in 1637, there were no illustrations.<sup>126</sup>

Although fully-illustrated Bibles were beyond the means of most, a type of biblical picture book which showed particular scenes from the Old and New Testaments had long been popular. The earliest of these was the *Biblia pauperum* (c.1462) which, as Peter van der Coelen points out, was neither a Bible nor for the poor. It was a work made for meditation.<sup>127</sup> This genre flourished around the end of the sixteenth century and into the seventeenth century. In the Amsterdam of Rembrandt's day, publishers became specialists in the field of printed biblical texts and illustration. Claes Jansz. Visscher (1587-1652), his son Nicolaes and grandson Nicolaus printed nine picture Bibles in several editions.<sup>128</sup>

Artists sometimes owned copies of such Bibles or Bible histories themselves or had access to them through private collections. Rembrandt was known to have made a rough copy from a print found in the *Historia del Testamento Vecchio* made in Italy by Sisto Badolocchio (1581-1647) as a source for the story of Isaac and Rebecca in his 1666 painting known as *The Jewish Bride* (figs. 57, 58, 59).<sup>129</sup>

Most biblical subjects were accessible to the artist and public alike through the sale of separate Bible prints. These ranged in quality and price; works by Lucas van Leyden, and in time some of Rembrandt's own etchings, fetched sometimes

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<sup>124</sup> P. Van der Coelen, "Pictures for the People?" in M. Lamberights and A.A. Den Hollander, *Lay Bibles in Europe 1450-1800*, (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2006): 188. See also Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture*, 42-51.

<sup>125</sup> Van der Coelen, 189.

<sup>126</sup> Van der Coelen, 189.

<sup>127</sup> Van der Coelen, 189. The *Biblia pauperum* was published around the middle of the fifteenth century. It was made as a block-book – the illustrations and the text were cut from a block of wood. Scenes from the Old Testament were chosen and interpreted as prefigurations of events in the New Testament rather than for their value as biblical stories in their own right.

The historian Sandra Hindman, suggests an even earlier version of illustrated biblical episodes, the *Historia Scholastica*, which was originally written in the second half of the twelfth century, as an inspiration for Netherlandish biblical paintings. Stories from this text were even dramatized as medieval mystery plays. Editions were increasingly illuminated and were finally published with added glosses because parts of the Bible were – "so donker van verstandenissen" (difficult to understand). Within the Netherlands itself the text became known as the *Historiebijbel*. See Sandra Hindman, "Fifteenth-century Dutch Bible Illustration and the *Historia Scholastica*" *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 37 (1974): 131-144.

<sup>128</sup> Van der Coelen, 190.

<sup>129</sup> The *Historia del Testamento Vecchio* was reprinted by Claes Jansz. Visscher in 1638. It was a picture Bible which included reproductions of Raphael's famous Vatican Loggia frescos.

exorbitant amounts – up to several hundred guilders for each print. But these were exceptions. In 1609, Bible prints from an Amsterdam printer cost an average price of three *stivers*. Prints made on cheap paper by anonymous craftsmen were known as *oortjesprenten*, the amount they cost to buy (an *oortje* was a quarter of a *stiver*).<sup>130</sup>

## The eye of the artist

Eric Sluijter explores the changing perspectives in art historical criticism surrounding seventeenth-century Dutch art. He notes a reluctance in past decades to emphasize what is exceptional about Rembrandt which has meant that the specific qualities of his art receive little attention.<sup>131</sup> The important work of Gary Schwartz, he states, is “primarily intended to place Rembrandt in relation to his clientele on the basis of historical documents” and consequently it loses sight of the painter as a painter.<sup>132</sup> This approach, he suggests, removes Rembrandt’s pictures from the pictorial tradition and places him in the position of illustrator “imitating one thing and another – whatever his patron wanted.”<sup>133</sup> Little notice, he says, is taken of Rembrandt’s own personal interpretation or the impact of his art on others. Ernst van der Wetering comes to this same conclusion. After years of research, he admits that Rembrandt cannot be “fully domesticated.” His art cannot be assessed as that of a “technician” but has to be approached “along categories that art historians tend to fear because they seem anachronistic or even romantic, the categories of *art* rather than *craft*, of *creation* rather than *production*.”<sup>134</sup>

Despite the pervading influence of culture, tradition and familial background, Rembrandt’s response to a subject was not invented by priest or patron; it was conceived by the artist himself. The acknowledgement of a creative basis for approaching Rembrandt’s art, and his biblical art in particular, allows for an appreciation which should not be limited by a single designation. Rembrandt was, above all things, an innovative artist, taking inspiration from but by no means dependent upon the tradition.

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<sup>130</sup> Van der Coelen, 192-3.

<sup>131</sup> Eric J. Sluijter, “New Approaches in Art History and the Changing Image of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art between 1960 and 1990,” in Henk van Veen and Franz Grijzenhout, eds. *The Golden Age of Dutch Painting in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 272-273.

<sup>132</sup> Sluijter, 273.

<sup>133</sup> Sluijter, 273.

<sup>134</sup> Ernst van der Wetering, *Rembrandt, the Painter at Work* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2000): 272-273.

It is not only the ability to enlarge on the tradition, to add a personal perspective to a subject but it is also a matter of a particular style, an inimitable way of forming and shaping figures, expressions, gestures and emotions which becomes a signifier for Rembrandt's work. While Rembrandt was able to paint portraits which pleased their patrons, the main body of his work assumes a style particularly his own.

Rembrandt's realisation had a quality, an intensity of observation and painterly execution which increased throughout his working life. Van der Wetering sees the treatment of light as a defining motif in Rembrandt's art. In his earlier works, he says, the light is strong and illuminating, in the later works the space is filled with a light which gathers around the figures as a luminous presence.<sup>135</sup> This particular quality of intuitive spirituality embodied in his treatment of light defines Rembrandt's biblical art and defies confessional boundaries.

It was Rembrandt's singular ability to unravel text and make it both intensely spiritual and recognisably human that commentators note. Alpers states: "While Dutch artists offer us visual texts, Rembrandt insists that it is the word within and not the surface of the texts that must be valued."<sup>136</sup> It was not just a simple matter of internalising a scene; Rembrandt lived with the Bible. He brought to his interpretations a unique appreciation of theological discourse and religious history, which went deeper than the visual image.

The artist's world is unique and personal; it is one of colour, form, intuition, creativity and memory, all of which give structure and visual meaning to the subject. At the heart of this work is the power of interpretation and imagination; each artist is, in this sense unique. Luther gave some insight into the creative process when he described an image as delineating itself, casting a shadow or projecting itself into the heart.<sup>137</sup> Some people simply recognise the power of the image in the heart as Luther did; others are able to give that shadow visual form. It is a gift, a particular creative perception which allows some to recognise and transmit part of the unknowable in a way that holds meaning for the viewer.

Rembrandt differed from his contemporaries in his range and choice of subject matter and produced many more biblical histories than did other artists working in the same market. He was intensely interested in the biblical narratives and his motivation

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<sup>135</sup> Ernst van der Wetering, *Quest of a Genius* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2006): 56

<sup>136</sup> Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983): 188-192.

<sup>137</sup> Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image*, 161.

cannot be seen as merely commercial. He engaged with the text both creatively and spiritually. His biblical histories spoke powerfully to viewers in his own day and they continue to do so. He inspires not only art lovers, but also preachers, writers on spirituality, theologians and ordinary human beings who recognise in his work something of themselves and of the human condition itself.

Erasmus was right to fear the power of the image to change the human heart. He acknowledged the view held by the ancient philosopher Aristotle that “painting is much more eloquent than speech and often penetrates more deeply into one’s heart.”<sup>138</sup> Luther, in recognising such power, thought he could contain it with words, but the hunger for the visual is seldom satisfied by the presence of words. It was the words of the Bible which stimulated Rembrandt’s religious imagination, but the realisation was his own.

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<sup>138</sup>David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1989): 50.

## Chapter Four: Rembrandt's Marian Works: an overview

### Introduction

Schwartz uses a telling analogy when he describes the presence of the Virgin Mary in Rembrandt's *oeuvre*. So closely integrated was Rembrandt's life with that of the Holy Family that he "could have been a relative if not a member" of that family. No family engaged his imagination more frequently. Throughout his life he was absorbed by what Schwartz describes as the "great Holy Family themes", the Nativity, the Adoration of the Shepherds, the Circumcision, the visit of the Magi the Presentation in the Temple and the Escape into Egypt.<sup>1</sup> At the centre of all these works was the Virgin Mary.

A study of Rembrandt's Marian works invites a variety of approaches. Rembrandt addressed the subject in all of the three media in which he worked, oil, etching and drawing. A stylistic investigation shows that he put each medium to a different use. His drawings of both the Virgin and the Holy Family can be read as spontaneous recordings of ideas as they came to mind and represent Rembrandt's purest response to his subject. The sheer number of his drawings on biblical themes shows him as a man who thought deeply about the scriptures.<sup>2</sup> Despite the volume of these sketches few can be shown to have been made as preparatory drawings for either his painted works or his etchings but, as will be seen, many show unique approaches to particular subjects and are complete art works in their own right. His paintings appear, at first glance, to be the least provocative of his Marian works for they portray family harmony and domestic piety, ideals which appealed directly to the emphasis placed on those virtues within the predominantly Calvinist society of his time. They are 'safe' works and if not directly commissioned, then made to have a broad appeal. With his Marian etchings, however, Rembrandt challenges 'official belief' and appears to express views that would have been anathema to a strict Reformist mindset. Yet it is this medium which provided the greatest opportunity for the dissemination of these works.

A thematic approach shows that most of Rembrandt's Marian works fall into broad categories. Rembrandt returns to the same biblical stories time and again in his

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<sup>1</sup> Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book*, 315.

<sup>2</sup> Slive states that up to 1400 drawings by Rembrandt have been preserved and catalogued (Slive, *Drawings of Rembrandt*, ix).

pursuit of an ever more appropriate visual form. The theme of the Presentation in the Temple, for example, is the subject for one of his earliest paintings, *Simeon's Prophecy* (1627-28).<sup>3</sup> It is also the last subject he painted, for an unfinished work, *Song of Simeon* (1669), was found on his easel after his death.<sup>4</sup> Between these two works there were many further representations of the subject in his drawings, etchings and paintings. Similarly Rembrandt returned to the subject of the *Mater Dolorosa*, the sorrowing Virgin, from early commissions of the 1630s up to the final decade of his life, around 1660. Scenes of the nativity and the early life of Christ, on the other hand, were largely limited to the first half of his career.

It is all but impossible to separate stylistic and thematic approaches in a discussion of Rembrandt's Marian *oeuvre* for they are woven into the chronology of his work. Schwartz observes Rembrandt's difficulty in drawing a line between humanity and the Holy Family – between the patterns of his life and theirs.<sup>5</sup> This overview does not attempt to provide detailed analysis of most works but rather seeks to give a broad chronological perspective in order to establish whether certain themes and even Rembrandt's particular use of media may relate more closely to events in his personal life. At best such a relationship can only be noted generally since the absence of date and signature, in many cases, makes both the attribution of Rembrandt's work and chronological reference to specific events always contestable.

Unless dated by the artist himself, Rembrandt's representations have been given a chronology in relation to other works, subjects and artistic maturity as analysed by a succession of eminent art historians and connoisseurs. In this study I depend particularly on the anthologies of Otto Benesch and Seymour Slive (drawings), Gary Schwartz and Eric Hinterding (etchings), to Abraham Bredius and Horst Gerson and the work currently available from the Rembrandt Research Project (paintings).<sup>6</sup>

Schwartz claims to have reproduced the complete collection of Rembrandt etchings in his 1993 work *The Complete Etchings of Rembrandt: Reproduced in*

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<sup>3</sup> Image source: *Simeon's Prophecy* (c.1628, Hamburg, Kunsthalle): Perlove and Silver, *Rembrandt's Faith*, 198.

<sup>4</sup> Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book*, 366; Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes*, 686. Image source: *Song of Simeon* (National Museum of Fine Arts, Stockholm): Perlove and Silver, *Rembrandt's Faith*, 329.

<sup>5</sup> Schwartz, 316.

<sup>6</sup> Benesch, *The Drawings of Rembrandt*; Slive, *Drawings of Rembrandt*; Schwartz, ed., *The Complete Etchings of Rembrandt Reproduced in Original Size*; Eric Hinterding, *Rembrandt as an Etcher, The Practice of Production and Distribution* (Ouderkerk: Sound and Vision Publishers, 2006); Abraham Bredius (revised by H. Gerson) *The Complete Edition of Paintings of Rembrandt* (London: Phaidon, 1969). Ernst van der Wetering et al. *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project (Dordrecht: Springer, 1978-).

*Original Size.*<sup>7</sup> Rembrandt's drawings are another matter. These are reproduced in part in many different volumes, the most comprehensive of which is arguably Benesch's 1955 edition of the drawings in six volumes.<sup>8</sup> While Rembrandt was in the habit of signing and dating his paintings and many of his etchings, fewer than two dozen of his drawings bear his signature, and, because they were rarely made as studies for paintings or etchings, few can be dated by their relationship to dated works.<sup>9</sup> This makes the chronological accuracy of these works a matter for periodic re-evaluation. Benesch has allowed a period of up to three years' discrepancy in the approximate dating of Rembrandt's undated drawings.<sup>10</sup> Since most were not preliminary sketches the value of Rembrandt's drawings lay in what Slive describes as Rembrandt's "insatiable urge to record what he saw with his inner as well as his outer eye."<sup>11</sup> These drawings will, for this reason, be treated as independent works.

The number and accuracy of the attribution of Rembrandt's painted works is evolving. The industry of the Rembrandt Research Project has seen many works re-attributed to other artists.<sup>12</sup> Since the investigations of this committee are not yet complete and its findings remain under review, I rely also on the earlier work *Rembrandt: The Complete Edition of the Paintings* (1969) catalogued by Bredius and revised by Gerson.<sup>13</sup> A further complicating factor is the de-attribution and in some cases the re-attribution of work across all media.

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<sup>7</sup> Schwartz, ed. *The Complete Etchings of Rembrandt*. An assessment of the number of Rembrandt's etchings becomes difficult when other writers such as Arthur Hind and Eric Hinterding count different states of a particular subject as separate etchings. See Hinterding, *Rembrandt as an Etcher*, and Arthur M Hind, *A Catalogue of Rembrandt Etchings* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1967).

<sup>8</sup> Otto Benesch, *The Drawings of Rembrandt*.

<sup>9</sup> Benesch, Introduction, x.

Rembrandt's signed drawings are largely those contributions he made to autograph books. For example, in 1652 he contributed two pen drawings to Jan Six's *album amicorum* called *Pandora*, one of *Minerva in her Study*, one of *Homer Reciting his Verse*; both are signed as is an entry in the *album amicorum* of Jacobus Heybloq (1623-90). Beneath a brown ink and wash picture of Simeon in the Temple in Heybloq's album there is an inscription "Rembrandt f. 1661". See Slive, *Drawings of Rembrandt*, Introduction to Volume One; Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes*, 577, and Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book*, 366.

<sup>10</sup> Benesch, *The Drawings of Rembrandt*, Introduction xi.

<sup>11</sup> Slive, *Drawings of Rembrandt*, Introduction ix.

<sup>12</sup> The Rembrandt Research Project was set up in 1968 with an interdisciplinary panel composed of Josua Bruyn, Bob Haak, S.H. Levie, P.J.J. van Thiel and Ernst van der Wetering to authenticate Rembrandt's oeuvre and to research and classify the many works which were attributed to his name. Four volumes have been published to date: Vol.I (1629-1631), published in 1982, Vol.II (1631-1634), published in 1986, Vol.III (1635-1642), published in 1990 and Vol.IV (Self Portraits), published in 2005. The findings of the committee have been the subject of much controversy in their own right. See for example Anthony Bailey, *Who Painted the Polish Rider: A Controversy Reconsidered* (New York: Timken Publishers, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> Abraham Bredius, revised by H. Gerson, *Rembrandt: The Complete Edition of the Paintings* (London: Phaidon, 1969).



As important as an examination of these works in relation to personal events of Rembrandt's life is the need to discern whether there is a development in his own theological perceptions evidenced in his approach to Marian themes. Six works have, therefore, been chosen for further analysis representing the media in which Rembrandt worked: a drawing, *The Annunciation* (c.1635); a painting, *Holy Family* (1633-35) and the four most controversial Marian etchings, *Death of the Virgin* (1639), *Virgin and Child in the Clouds* (1641), *Virgin with the Instruments of the Passion* (c.1652) and the *Virgin with Cat and Snake* (1654). These have been selected for they illustrate Rembrandt's approach to what could be regarded as 'safe' works in terms of the Protestant tradition and also to themes which lie outside that tradition. They will be examined in terms of their relationship to their visual antecedents, their place within the art of Rembrandt's time, current academic interpretations, their theological implications and, most importantly for this thesis, in terms of where they fit along a Catholic-Protestant spectrum.

## Rembrandt's Marian Works ... The Thirties

Rembrandt was just twenty years old when, in 1626, he left the studio of his second and last teacher, Pieter Lastman, to become an independent artist. His first etchings were made in that year. They took as their subject events from the infancy narrative of the birth of Christ, *The Circumcision* (1626) (fig.60) and *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* (c.1626) (fig.61). As would be expected, both works show the Virgin Mary but only as a subsidiary figure.<sup>14</sup> These etchings fit within a traditional, visual context. Many such prints were circulating at this time. Dürer's *Life of the Virgin Series* (1503-4) for instance, included a version of each of these subjects. Hans Burgkmair (1473-1531), Lucas van Leyden (1494?-1533) and Hendrick Golzius (1558-1617) all include one or both of these titles among their printed works.

There is no certainty about Rembrandt's access to such art – at this early stage in his career he could hardly have owned an extensive collection of prints, but these were such common subjects within the visual tradition that a familiarity with them could be expected. Neither of these etchings was controversial since both derive from

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<sup>14</sup> These first two etchings do not appear in Arthur Hind's catalogue of Rembrandt's etchings. The first religious etching Hind names is a 'Flight into Egypt: a sketch' which does not appear to coincide either in date or description with a similar etched sketch of the same scene shown in the illustrations as Figure 63 and dated to 1627. See Hind, *A Catalogue of Rembrandt's Etchings*, 43-45.

biblical text. The story of the Circumcision is told in Luke 2: 21 – “when the eighth day came and the child was to be circumcised, they gave him the name Jesus ...” Here Rembrandt shows the ceremony taking place in a temple setting; later, as shall be seen, Rembrandt returns the ceremony to a more likely situation, that of the stable. The High Priest, curiously dressed in the robes of a Catholic bishop, performs the ritual while Joseph holds the child and the Virgin looks over Joseph’s shoulder. The story of the flight into Egypt, however, is apocryphal but it does have a biblical basis: Matthew’s Gospel tells of the angel who came to warn Joseph that his family was in danger and that he should “Get up, take the child and his mother ... and escape into Egypt” (Mat. 2: 13-15). Myriads of apocryphal ideas have evolved around this text. One of these, which lent pictorial possibilities to the text itself, was the ‘rest’, an imagined scene which evolved into a specific motif in art describing the nativity narrative.

Roelof van Straten proposes that these initial works draw heavily on the work of Pieter Lastman, and are cross-pollinated with the work of Rembrandt’s friend and fellow-student, Jan Lievens.<sup>15</sup> Van Straten believes that the first and second etchings attributed to Rembrandt, the *Circumcision* (1626) (fig.60) where the Virgin has a supplementary role as a nervous onlooker, and the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* (c.1626) (fig.61) where the Virgin has a central role, were in fact made by Lievens. This premise is based on stylistic similarities to Lievens’ work and chronological discrepancies. Rembrandt, he points out, spent only six months in Lastman’s workshop to complete his training as an artist; his earlier training, which would have started with drawing lessons, was made at the studio of his Leiden teacher Jacob van Swanenburgh (1571-1638). Van Straten suggests also that the influence of Lastman’s drawing style on Rembrandt has been exaggerated. Lievens had been apprenticed to Lastman for two years (1619-21); it is more likely that Lievens’ work would exhibit

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<sup>15</sup> Roelof van Straten, “Rembrandt’s ‘Earliest Prints’ Reconsidered”, *Artibus et Historiae* 23:45 (2002) 167.

The Leiden burgomaster and historian Jan Jansz. Orlers (1570-1646), records the births of both Rembrandt and Lievens who were born a year apart. There is a clear impression at this stage at least, that Orlers regarded Lievens as superior to Rembrandt. Because of the closeness of their ages, the fact that they were both born in Leiden and that they studied under the same master, Pieter Lastman, their names have been inevitably linked. Arthur Wheelock states that a number of Lievens’ early and best works have been attributed to Rembrandt. There is little doubt that they became and continued to be close friends but until relatively recently, according to Wheelock, Lievens has lived under Rembrandt’s shadow. See Arthur Wheelock, “Jan Lievens: Bringing New Light to an Old Master” in Wheelock, ed. *Jan Lievens, A Dutch Master Rediscovered* (New Haven: Yale University Press): 2-7.

signs of Lastman's influence than would that of Rembrandt.<sup>16</sup> At the present time these two works are generally accepted as being the two first etchings Rembrandt made.<sup>17</sup>

Rembrandt's approach to the scene changes dramatically between that first etching of the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* (1626) (fig.61) and a second *Flight into Egypt*, made in 1627 (fig.63). This in itself lends some credence to van Straten's proposition. Rembrandt switches from the bucolic pleasure of a 'rest' on the flight, which may have been based on Lastman's *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* (1620) (fig.62), to his own more realistic interpretation of the event made almost contemporaneously. In this etched *Flight into Egypt* (1627) (fig.63), both the style and the approach to the biblical text change – Rembrandt shows only the tension and weary fear of the refugee family fleeing for their safety. Joseph and Mary are shown from the back, Mary furtively looking behind as if to see if they are followed. In this way Rembrandt emphasizes the warning of the angel and the danger from which the Holy Family were escaping.

Rembrandt's first painted work, also *The Flight into Egypt* (1627) (fig.64), was followed by a painting of *Simeon's Prophecy* (c.1627) (fig.65). Again, both show a stylistic reliance on the work of Lastman in the tonal variation, the figure groupings and the prominence of background.<sup>18</sup> Despite this similarity, Rembrandt establishes early on what was to become the defining characteristic for his biblical representations – his total involvement in the humanity of the scene he was recording. In his painting *Flight into Egypt* (c.1627), he pictures the escape from Egypt as a hasty departure. This work does not have the dramatic qualities of the etching, but neither does it have the romantically picturesque qualities commonly associated with such scenes which Rembrandt shows in his earliest *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* (fig.61). There is a gentle and tired quality about it. It is a night scene with the frightened Virgin seated on a donkey and bundled in a blanket with her child in her arms. Joseph trudges on; even the donkey walks with a lowered head, his ears pointing the direction they were to follow. Another etching of this scene *Flight into Egypt* (1633) (fig.66) again shows the slow, plodding progress of a heavily-laden

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<sup>16</sup> Van Straten, 167.

<sup>17</sup> See Schwartz, *The Complete Etchings*, B59, S398. Schwartz sees these works as having the same rawness as the paintings of the period.

<sup>18</sup> Christian Tümpel notes that Rembrandt studied Lastman's works for their arrangement of crowd scenes and for gestures which described certain situations. Almost all his Old Testament works, says Tümpel, were inspired by Lastman (Tümpel, *Images and Metaphors*, 196).

donkey with its burden of the Virgin and her son made more meaningful by Rembrandt's obviously improved skill with the etching needle.

In his painting *Simeon's Prophecy* (c.1627) Rembrandt chooses the moment when the elderly Simeon addresses the Virgin: "and a sword shall pierce your own soul" (Luke 2: 35). His hand is outstretched solicitously, as if to comfort her as he foretells the disturbing future that lies ahead for this woman and her child. The sun, streaming through the barred window, throws the shadow of a cross on the wall behind and suggests the reason for the Virgin's thoughtful expression. Although Mary had heard Simeon's words she could not have known that that this son would eventually die on a cross. Despite the fact that he had not quite mastered the physical properties of a newborn child (there is something of the rigid peg-doll quality to the Christ child), Rembrandt manages to convey, even from this early stage in his career, the momentous weight of Simeon's words on this young mother.

Three years on, in 1630, Rembrandt etches a circumcision again. His naturalism has developed. In his *The Circumcision: The Small Plate* (c.1630) (fig.67) he shows the child Jesus, his head thrown back in a wide-mouthed scream, as he is held in the grip of a Temple elder and painfully circumcised as his parents appear to look anxiously on. Although scenes of the Circumcision had many artistic precedents most were formulaic and lacked the emotion and mystery that Rembrandt evokes with the shrieking child, the rising incense and the mysterious atmosphere of the Temple. This was one of three etchings in which Rembrandt places the Circumcision in a Temple setting.<sup>19</sup> Artists tended to situate this event in a Temple setting, as Rembrandt does in his earlier depictions of the scene, but the biblical account does not place the event. The Gospel story (Luke 2: 21) tells of the Circumcision taking place eight days after the birth of the child.<sup>20</sup> The Law of Moses, however, does not allow young mothers to enter the Temple until after the ceremony of 'purification', which takes place forty days after the birth of a male child (Leviticus 12: 1-8). It is the ceremony of Purification which is most commonly visually conflated with the Circumcision and shown taking place in the Temple. Infant Jewish boys were circumcised on the eighth day, as was Christ himself (Luke 2: 21), precluding the presence of the mother. Rembrandt initially followed the traditional Temple setting but later, as his search for

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<sup>19</sup> The three Etchings are: *The Circumcision: The Small Plate* (1630) and two later works, *Simeon's Hymn of Praise* (1639) and *The Presentation in the Dark Manner* (1654).

<sup>20</sup> For an account of the Purification and the Mosaic prescription for the ceremony, see *The Golden Legend*, Vol. 1, 143-151.

realism grew and in order to allow Mary to be represented in the scene with more historical plausibility, he was to show the Circumcision taking place in the stable.

Where Rembrandt's earliest etchings were focussed on the first years of Christ's life, his first drawings recorded his nascent interest in the story of the Passion and Death of Christ. This was a theme which was to occupy him for much of the 1630s and, to a lesser degree, it remained a constant source of inspiration throughout his life. Slive describes this period in Rembrandt's life as one in which he was "intensely absorbed in the problems of biblical illustration inspired by his important commission for the *Passion Series*."<sup>21</sup> This commission for four works on the Passion and Death of Christ made around 1631, saw the first of the paintings, the *Descent from the Cross* and the *Elevation of the Cross* enter the collection of the Stadhouder Frederik Hendrik between 1632 and 1636.<sup>22</sup> The final paintings, *The Entombment* and the *Resurrection of Christ* were finished by 1639.

Rembrandt's spontaneous drawings, made around this time, evoke the emotion of the Passion. Few have anything but a loose iconographic association with the painted series, so they cannot be seen to be preliminary sketches, but all attempt to summon the feeling of the event. In a particularly potent sketch, *Group for the Entombment of Christ* (1632-3) (fig.68) the Virgin is shown walking behind the group accompanying the body of her dead son. In the *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (c.1635) (fig.69) she is pictured cradling his head as his body is laid on the ground. The Lamentation was another theme that Rembrandt was to develop, returning to it many times and concentrating with increasing intensity on the pain of the Virgin and her physical and emotional reaction to the death of her son.

At the same time as Rembrandt was making the *Passion Series*, he had personal distractions of his own. His meeting, engagement and subsequent marriage to Saskia Uylenburgh, events which took place between 1632 and 1634, may have had some influence in his widening choice of subject and an interest in domestic scenes. Two further scenes from the early life of Christ *The Holy Family* (1632) (fig.70), an etching pictured within a domestic interior, and the painting, *Adoration of the Magi* (1632) (fig.71), reflect perhaps a growing interest in family life. These works, made in the same year, show how differently Rembrandt treats the Virgin Mary in these two media. The etched Virgin looks pensive and distracted; she seems unaware that the

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<sup>21</sup> Slive, *Drawings of Rembrandt*, Vol. 1. Introduction ix.

<sup>22</sup> Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book*, 146-152. Image source: Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book*, 153-155.

baby is no longer feeding but has fallen asleep. Here there is a sense of unease, as if she is contemplating Simeon's words and fears for the future of her son. Joseph sits in the background reading, oblivious to the Virgin's disquiet. In the painting, however, the Virgin shows only motherly pride as she shows her son to the Magus who kneels in prayer before him.

In many of these early works, the Virgin is what Gilboa describes as a "pronounced subsidiary figure"; she is there but, as in the etched *The Circumcision: Small Plate* (c.1630), the focus is on the officiating priest.<sup>23</sup> However, Mary began to be shown with increasing prominence in Rembrandt's work in the mid 1630s. For the first time, Rembrandt made Mary the central figure in a work. The drawing *The Annunciation* (c.1635) (fig.72), depicts the visitation of the angel to the Virgin Mary where she is asked to become the mother of Christ. This subject was available to Rembrandt through at least three print series on the Life of the Virgin that he could have known, those of Dürer, Hendrik Goltzius (1558-1617) and Jacques Callot (1592-1635), all of whom presented the story in a traditional manner with the angel appearing before the kneeling Virgin.<sup>24</sup> This drawing illustrates as well as any, Rembrandt's unique and theological approach to biblical illustration, and is one of the works selected for independent analysis. It is a drawing which does not appeal to classical elements of pose, physical beauty or radiant colour, as this subject is inevitably presented through the visual tradition, but focuses on the moment when the divine becomes human. Rembrandt describes that event in all its human manifestation, when normality is shattered by a heavenly messenger – with its accompanying fear and confusion.

The same awareness of Mary's role in the history of salvation is shown when Rembrandt includes the Virgin with the apostles in his painting *The Incredulity of Thomas* (1634) (fig.73). Rembrandt shows what the scriptures do not reveal, that Mary was present in the upper room and numbered among the apostles.<sup>25</sup> The

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<sup>23</sup> Gilboa, *Images of the Feminine in Rembrandt's Work*, 52.

<sup>24</sup> Rembrandt's dependence on the work of Callot has been underestimated. Rembrandt is known to have used Callot's beggars as inspiration for some of his own early prints of beggars. See Ludwig Münz, *Rembrandt's Etchings* (London: Phaidon, 1952): 15; Rosenberg, *Rembrandt Life and Work*, 240; Schwartz, *Rembrandt's Eyes*, 303. It is my view that Rembrandt drew on Callot's other works, especially those from his *Life of the Virgin* series (1633) for inspiration. This will be shown in more detail in an analysis of Rembrandt's *Death of the Virgin* in a later chapter.

<sup>25</sup> John's Gospel tells the story of the day of Christ's Resurrection. The Apostles were gathered in the evening in an upper room for fear of the Jews, when Christ appeared to them. Thomas was not present. When told of the appearance Thomas refused to believe that it was Christ himself who appeared until

inclusion of the Virgin in this particular episode, although unusual, was not a new schematic approach. Two contemporary painters, Hendrick ter Brugghen (1588-1629) and Gerrit van Honthorst (1592-1666) had also included the Virgin in this scene. It may be of some relevance that both these artists were Catholics.<sup>26</sup>

In a brief drawing, *Study for the Adoration of the Magi* (c.1635) (fig.74), Rembrandt shows his knowledge of both Mariology and the visual tradition. Here, the Virgin presents the Christ child to a Magus – not as a baby lying in his mother’s lap but in much the same manner as early Byzantine icons show the Virgin with her son. The Virgin as ‘Theotokos’, the Christ-bearer, presents her child, upright, to the world as the Son of God.<sup>27</sup> Rembrandt manages in a few quick lines to show a Christ child intensely human in his weak-limbed dependency and an earthly king made humble in the presence of his God. Rembrandt must have observed such a scene, perhaps with his own son born that same year; the pose is so familiar: the proud mother her head tilted to one side displays the naked baby hanging from her hands with its feet planted in her lap but its neck not yet strong enough to support the out-sized head.

Rembrandt appears also to deeply veil the Virgin – an allusion perhaps to the Old Testament story of Moses where he receives a call from God in the burning bush and he covers his face before the Divine (Exodus 3:6).<sup>28</sup> The veil is used metaphorically in the New Testament as well. The Visit of the Magi is celebrated as the feast of the Epiphany. An epiphany is, in itself, a revelation, an un-veiling. Christian Tümpel cites Paul’s second Epistle to the Corinthians as a source for the motif.<sup>29</sup> Here Paul speaks of a veil which hides the face of Christ from wherever Moses is read, a reference to

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he himself had seen Christ and touched his wounds (John 20: 19-29). Eight days later the Apostles were again gathered, this time with Thomas present, and Christ appeared again and invited Thomas to touch his wounds. The only mention of the presence of the Virgin at either of these gatherings is made in the Acts of the Apostles 1: 14, which states that a group of apostles gathered together in the Upper Room after the Resurrection, “And all these joined in continuous prayer, together with several women including Mary the mother of Jesus and his brothers”. There is no indication which, if either, gathering was the one where Thomas met Christ.

<sup>26</sup> Caravaggio does not represent the Virgin in his *Doubting Thomas* (1602-3) nor does Rubens in his evocation of the same theme (1612-14) but Gerrit van Honthorst includes an elderly woman, probably the Virgin Mary, in his *Incredulity of Thomas* (1620) (Prado, Madrid) as does Hendrick ter Brugghen in his *Doubting Thomas* (1621-23) (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam).

<sup>27</sup> The term ‘Theotokos’ as applied to the Virgin Mary, was the subject of bitter debate during the Council of Ephesus (431 AD). By the year 433AD all parties were in agreement about Mary’s title Theotokos, Mother of God.

<sup>28</sup> ‘I am the God of your father’, he said ‘the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob’. At this Moses covered his face, afraid to look at God.

<sup>29</sup> Tümpel uses this biblical source to explain the presence of the curtain in Rembrandt’s painting *The Holy Family with Curtain* (1646) (Kassel). I suggest such an explanation is equally applicable to this work. See Tümpel, *Rembrandt, Images and Metaphors*, 201.

the Jews of the Old Testament who do not believe Christ is the promised Messiah. This veil “will not be removed until they turn to the Lord” (2 Corinthians 3:16). It is the Virgin who unveils the Old Testament through the birth of her son and reveals him to a Magus one of the first to recognise “the light shed by the Good News of the glory of Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:4). As will be seen in later analyses, Rembrandt uses the imagery of a veil or curtain on several occasions to emphasise the role of the Virgin as the one who reveals Christ’s humanity to the world.

From this point Rembrandt’s depictions of the Virgin could be seen to relate increasingly to his own personal situation. His drawings, in particular, explore a domestic life such as that which Rembrandt might have shared with his wife Saskia. He had only a short time to enjoy domestic happiness. Eighteen months after he was married, in December 1635, his first son Rumbartus was born. Infancy in Rembrandt’s time was a dangerous affair; Rumbartus was to die two months later. The two closely-linked drawings of the *Holy Family seated by a Window* (c.1635) (fig.75) and the *Virgin and Child seated near a Window* (c.1635) (fig.76) evoke a fraught happiness. Rembrandt suggests, in the deeply contemplative Virgin, a mother pondering the future for her son. Where he includes Joseph, the putative father, he sets him apart, separated, but thoughtfully studying the intimate scene. The sketch of the winding staircase on the verso of *Virgin and Child Seated near a Window* (fig.77) recalls a similar feature in Rembrandt’s own house.<sup>30</sup> It appears almost as a self-identification, as if Rembrandt is setting this scene in his own home.<sup>31</sup> Julia Lloyd Williams notes the number of studies of mothers and children made by Rembrandt at this time. “Een ditto daerin sijn 135 tekeningen sijnde het vrouwenleven met kinderen van Rembrandt” (a portfolio containing 135 drawings of the lives of women and children by Rembrandt) was included in the inventory of Rembrandt’s friend, the marine artist Jan van de Cappelle (1626-1679). It was thought to have been bought at the sale of Rembrandt’s effects in 1657-8. The drawings of the *Virgin and Child seated near a Window* and *Virgin and Child seated near a Window* could well have been have been included in this portfolio.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> A circular staircase forms the central core of Rembrandt’s house (now known as the *Museum het Rembrandthuis*) in St Anthonisbreestraat in Amsterdam.

<sup>31</sup> It is generally accepted that, since there is a close relationship in both style and chronology between these drawings and others that show Saskia sick in bed, some of these drawings represent his own family (Williams, *Rembrandt’s Women*, 131).

<sup>32</sup> Williams, 131.



At much the same time, Rembrandt painted an idyllic scene of intimate domestic pride.<sup>33</sup> His *The Holy Family* (c.1633-35) (fig.78) shows the nursing Virgin with Joseph, her husband, contemplating the beauty of her child. In this representation, however, Rembrandt returns to the particularly Catholic motif of the Virgin breastfeeding, *Maria Lactans*. This work will again be analysed in a later section. Rembrandt expresses a similarly intimate tenderness in the *Holy Family with St. Anne* (1640) (fig.79), where the Virgin is also shown breastfeeding her baby and in the later *Holy Family with a Curtain* (1646) (fig.80) where the Virgin plays with her child. His relatively conservative approach to the iconography for these painted works may have responded to a general acceptability within a Reformed world for scenes that illustrated biblical precedents for domestic virtue. His paintings appear to follow the long Catholic tradition of representations of the Madonna and Child by showing tender Virgins and contented children but his choice of motif, the nursing Virgin, for the *Holy Family* (1635) and *Holy Family with St. Anne* (1640) came from a tradition long past. Marina Warner points out that although the nursing Virgin as *Maria Lactans* had been a popular subject in the late fifteenth century, by the end of the Renaissance it had become indecorous for the Virgin to bare her breast.<sup>34</sup> In reviving an outmoded iconography, Rembrandt could well be seen as recording happy intimate scenes, newly familiar from his domestic life.

Throughout the second half of the 1630s the conflicting interests of domestic happiness and maternal pain continued to occupy Rembrandt's thoughts as he worked on the *Passion Series*. Rembrandt includes the Virgin in scenes of the Passion as the agonised mother of a dead son. It must have become a painfully familiar scene for Rembrandt since Saskia gave birth to three children in these five years, all of whom died soon after childbirth. It was at this time that he began to differentiate the Virgin from her surroundings and to concentrate on her own particular sorrow, the sorrow of the bereaved mother.

There is a discernable difference in the way in which Rembrandt treats the figure of the Virgin in his graphic works. His drawings and etchings register disquiet, his Virgins invariably appear troubled. With his quick sketch, *Studies for the Mater Dolorosa and other Mourners* (c.1637) (fig.81), Rembrandt measures the pain of

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<sup>33</sup> Broos notes the suggested pictorial sources for this work as Raphael, Titian and Van Dyck. See Broos, *Index to the Formal Sources of Rembrandt's Art*, 58.

<sup>34</sup> Warner, *Alone of all her Sex*, 203.

separation – a mother’s loss of her son. His juxtaposition of images shows two standing figures and two seated figures identified as derived from a print, *The Lamentation* (1509) by Lucas Cranach the Elder (fig.82).<sup>35</sup> The two standing figures could be mourners and two figures seated on the ground are probably the Virgin, shown much as she would be seen in a Pietà. There are two crude sketches in the upper right hand section of this page which are generally ignored when these sketches are discussed. Marijn Schapelhouman, one of the few commentators to mention these sketches, describes them as “two chalk scribbles” which are “so economical they are illegible to anyone but the artist”. They have a function, she suggests, but it is very difficult to work out.<sup>36</sup> However, they are identifiable; they are sketches of babies. The upper child takes the form of a baby held on its mother’s shoulder, its little arm draped over the shoulder for support, its head turned to the viewer with large eyes staring (fig.83). The sketch below shows a child lying against the chest of its mother, one arm tucked under his body the other tucked under his cheek (fig.84). The juxtaposition of babies with figures from the Lamentation suggests that Rembrandt is playing with ideas of motherhood and loss. Slive notes the close connection between Rembrandt’s personal experiences and his spontaneous drawings.<sup>37</sup> It is on this sketch that he wrote those precious words “een dijvoort thr(?) eesoer dat in ein fijn harte bewaert wert troost harer beleevende siel” (a devout treasure that in a fine heart consoles her compassionate soul). These works carry a particular poignancy since they were made soon after the death of his first-born child Rumbartus.

The subject of death and loss continued to inspire Rembrandt. In a sub-scene to his *The Descent from the Cross* (1634) (fig.85), he shows the Virgin slumped in the arms of her companions. While the focus is on the body of Christ as he is lowered from the cross, the light illuminates faintly the figure of the Virgin. Rembrandt imitates the posture of Christ’s limp and lifeless body in her fallen figure. The mother’s pain mirrors her son’s suffering both visually and theologically and suggests the compassionate response which the viewer might have to such a scene.<sup>38</sup> Rembrandt’s focus on the Lamentation as a separate theme within the Passion narrative revived a long iconological tradition. The Flemish painter Rogier van der Weyden (c.1399-

<sup>35</sup> See Marijn Schapelhouman, *Rembrandt and the Art of Drawing* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2006):78.

<sup>36</sup> Schapelhouman identifies this page of sketches as preparatory drawings for Rembrandt’s *Lamentation* (1637) (Schapelhouman, 77-79).

<sup>37</sup> Seymour Slive, *Drawings of Rembrandt*, Vol. 1, 15.

<sup>38</sup> Viladesau names the response such scenes should evoke: emotion (affectum), sadness (dolente) and patience (patientia) (Viladesau, *The Triumph of the Cross*, 133).

1464) is credited with introducing the theme.<sup>39</sup> In his much-copied altarpiece *Descent from the Cross* (c.1435) (fig.86), his Virgin's fall parallels that of her son visually identifying her intimate participation in his suffering.

Harvey Hamburg suggests that the importance of the theme of the Lamentation lies in its assertion of the Virgin's participation in the central act of Christianity, the sacrifice on Calvary.<sup>40</sup> Such imagery evolved from some basic tenets of Catholic Marian theology. Mary is identified as the figure of the church itself; her participation at Calvary identifies her as *co-redemptrix*, as sharing in the redemptive nature of her son.<sup>41</sup> There are aspects of his depiction of the sorrowing Mary that suggest that Rembrandt was aware that in using such imagery he was adopting a motif which ran counter to Reformed belief. Gilboa states that when Rembrandt places the Virgin at the foot of the cross in *The Descent from the Cross* (c.1634) made for the Passion Series, he pictures her as barely discernible in the darkened lower left of the picture in deference to the Protestant faith of the commissioner Frederick Hendrick.<sup>42</sup> Some measure of Reformed antagonism to representations of the Virgin either collapsed at the foot of the cross or holding the dead Christ in her arms can be seen in the first onslaught of the *beeldestorm* (iconoclasm) in the city of Amsterdam. *De beeldestorm* began in Amsterdam on 23 August 1566 in the Oude Kerk; it is recorded that the first statue to be destroyed was one of the Virgin with the dead Christ on her knee.<sup>43</sup> In later scenes of the Lamentation, Rembrandt brings the Virgin out of the shadows and makes her suffering more explicit. He shows the Virgin's grief in a night scene of *The Lamentation* (c.1635) (fig.87) where both the fallen Mary with the body of her son

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<sup>39</sup> Harvey E. Hamburg, "The Problem of *Lo Spasimo* of the Virgin in Cinquecento Paintings of the Descent from the Cross", *Sixteenth-Century Journal*, 12:4 (1981): 49. Hamburg examines both the opinions and assertions found in the writings of the desert fathers and the devotional life of the Middle Ages which still influenced sixteenth-century art and devotion. *Lo Spasimo* (the collapse of the Virgin at the foot of the cross) was seen as tied to the Virgin birth. Mary did not suffer during childbirth. Her suffering came at the foot of the cross. When Christ gave Mary into the care of St John in his last words from the cross "Woman this is your son ... Behold thy mother" (John 19: 26-27) these words are seen as extending the motherhood of Mary to all the disciples of her son. Thus the birth of the Christian is seen not only in the suffering of Christ but in the agony of his mother. This imagery is made more explicit in Van der Weyden's *Altarpiece of the Seven Sacraments* (1445-50, Koninklijk Museum, Antwerp) where Mary's swoon is seen as giving birth to the church in the image of the priest at the altar behind her shown elevating the host during a Mass. For a detailed analysis of the iconography surrounding Mary's suffering at the foot of the cross as a birth-image, see Amy Neff "The Pain of *Compassio*: Mary's Labour at the Foot of the Cross" *Art Bulletin* 90:2 (June 1998): 254-273.

<sup>40</sup> Hamburg, "The Problem of *Lo Spasimo*", 45.

<sup>41</sup> Hamburg, 51.

<sup>42</sup> Gilboa, *Images of the Feminine*, 56.

<sup>43</sup> Kronenburg, *Maria's Heerlijkheid in Nederland*, Vol. 7, 82.

appear to have been given equal emphasis. In a small sketch *Bust of the Mourning Virgin* (1637) (fig.88), Rembrandt makes her pain the focus of the work.

By the end of the 1630s Rembrandt's inclusions of the Virgin Mary can be related to his many drawings of Saskia sick, for example, his *Saskia Lying in Bed*, (1638) (fig.89). In 1639, in what might be considered the most moving example of this relationship, Rembrandt made one of his largest etchings, the *Death of the Virgin* (1639) (fig.90). This etching revived an apocryphal theme visually familiar from early Netherlandish antecedents but again, long out of favour.<sup>44</sup> Rembrandt's reinterpretation of this theme, I suggest, opened a range of theological possibilities which confronted contemporary Reformed thinking. With this etching Rembrandt's inclusions of the Virgin Mary could no longer be explained solely in terms of the visual tradition, generic in their basic subject matter and simply variations on well-known biblical themes. The complexity of the iconography and the reasons why Rembrandt might have revived the topic of the dying Virgin make this image of special interest for this study and again it will be a subject for later analysis.

## The Forties

The early 1640s were marked by a return to familiar Marian themes. There were some drawings which detail aspects of the *Deposition* (1633), the *Lamentation* (c.1635) and the *Entombment*(1639) of Christ, subjects from the *Passion Series* in which Rembrandt had previously included the figure of the Virgin. The greater emphasis on the suffering Virgin places these works clearly within the framework of Catholic devotional imagery. Such imagery can be related to a Franciscan tradition.<sup>45</sup> Hamburg notes the special devotion of that order of religious Friars to the Sorrows

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<sup>44</sup> This scene is found most notably in the work of Dürer *The Death of the Virgin* (1512), Martin Schoengauer, *Death of the Virgin* (c.1478), and the stained glass window of this same subject made by Dirck Crabeth for the Oude Kerk in Amsterdam, all of which have been named as possible inspirations for Rembrandt's adoption of this subject.

<sup>45</sup> The continuity of the tradition by which the Virgin was regarded as *co-redemptrix* through her suffering at the foot of the cross was exemplified in the writings of early seventeenth-century Franciscan writers. A typical testimony comes from the writings of Placid M. Frangipane (1635) where he states the Mary deserves the title of co-redemptrix because everything which Christ merited for us *de condign* (merited by honour) was merited for us *de congruo* (merited by justice, worthiness or desert) by Mary. She was both innocent and immaculate; were she not so she could not be Christ's co-worker in the act of redemption. Again in the *Elucidario* (1643) of Francis de Rojas O.F.M, Rojas writes "On Calvary Mary immolates herself together with Christ, and this twofold sacrifice is offered up to the eternal father for our redemption". See Hamburg "The Problem of *Lo Spasimo*", 60.

of Mary.<sup>46</sup> This will become important in a later analysis of further examples of Rembrandt's Marian works.

There were glimpses also of domestic happiness. In 1641, Rembrandt painted his only finished representation of another important scene in the life of the Virgin, *The Visitation*, where Mary goes to visit her elderly cousin Elizabeth (fig.91). The story of the meeting of two women both pregnant through miraculous interventions may well have been made in response to Saskia's own pregnancy. She was pregnant again at the time this was painted and that same year gave birth to their son Titus who was the only one of their children to survive infancy. It is at this time also that Rembrandt returns to the theme of the Holy Family as a happy domestic unit.

There was a prominence given to Joseph in the family scenes from c.1640, all of which are located in the carpenter's workshop. In two drawings made around this time, both named *Holy Family in the Carpenter's Workshop* (c.1640-42) (figs.92, 93), Joseph works away quietly in the foreground. The carpenter's workshop is first seen as background in his earlier painting, *The Holy Family* (1633-35) and it is repeated in his paintings *Holy Family with St. Anne* (1640) and *Holy Family with Angels* (1645). These may provide a metaphoric parallel to Rembrandt's own working life, for he appears to have copied the detail of the windows from his own studio, shown in his drawing *Rembrandt's Studio with Model* (c.1655) (fig.94), in both the drawing *Holy Family in the Carpenter's Workshop* (fig.92) and in the *Holy Family with St. Anne* (fig.95). It is as if he is emphasising and honouring the role of the father as worker and an integral part of the family. Tümpel suggests that here Rembrandt was particularly absorbed with ideas of fatherhood and the responsibilities this role entailed.<sup>47</sup>

In 1641, Rembrandt made his uniquely personal etching of the Virgin Mary, *Virgin and Child in the Clouds* (1641) (fig.96), where, as will be argued in a later chapter, he gives the Virgin the face of his beloved Saskia. The subject itself owes something to the tradition. It is derivative of earlier forms of the Madonna of Humility. The Virgin pictured among the clouds, usually surrounded by accompanying angels, was a popular subject for the decorative excesses of Renaissance and Baroque art. Rembrandt's inspiration is generally accepted as taken from Federico Barocci's (1526-1612) image *Madonna and Child in the Clouds*

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<sup>46</sup> See also Neff, "The Pain of *Compassio*", 257.

<sup>47</sup> Tümpel, *Images and Metaphors*, 188.

(1581). The etching is both a meditation on the pain of divine motherhood and on human motherhood for it was made at a time when Rembrandt's own life was bereft. Another daughter, Cornelia, had died in 1640, so too had his mother and Saskia was again sick and pregnant. The few years leading to Saskia's death in 1642 were visually chronicled by Rembrandt as years of sickness and suffering.

Monographs of Rembrandt's life show Saskia's death to be a turning point in the nature and style of Rembrandt's work. Visser 't Hooft claims that from this point the Holy Family became central to Rembrandt's biblical vision.<sup>48</sup> Westermann sees Rembrandt's work from this time as being smaller and more tranquil, introspective and sometimes melancholy.<sup>49</sup> The increase in the number of Holy Families made in this period of his life could reflect what Westermann notes as the growing popularity of domestic paintings of peasant and suburban life.<sup>50</sup> The change could also lie, as Westermann suggests, in a difference in clientele. Rembrandt's appeal appeared to have moved from wealthy merchants and professionals to a circle of intellectuals and artists.<sup>51</sup> Although Westermann acknowledges a change in Rembrandt's artistic style, she views it from the pragmatic perspective of patronage and artistic fashion rather than as an inner transformation in Rembrandt himself.

Between these two extremes, Schwartz points out that Rembrandt's melding of the spiritual and the physical in his depictions of Christ is too deeply wrought to allow such distinctions. Rembrandt's imaginative life, he says, overlaps both his spiritual and his temporal life. All merge, so that Rembrandt's works become for the viewer at the same time a recording of domestic life and a visualisation of sacred events.<sup>52</sup>

This visual overlap is shown with particular intensity when the miraculous nature of the Holy Family is given prominence. In two drawings and a painting of the Holy Family from 1643-1645, the everyday normality of the scene is disrupted by the presence of angels. The descending angels, seen in the two drawings of this time *Holy Family in the Workshop* (c.1645) (fig.97) and *The Holy Family Asleep with Angels* (c.1645) (fig.98) indicate that these were most probably preparatory drawings for the

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<sup>48</sup> Visser 't Hooft, *Rembrandt and the Gospels*, 19-21.

<sup>49</sup> Westermann, *Rembrandt*, 177.

<sup>50</sup> Westermann, 184.

<sup>51</sup> Westermann, 177.

<sup>52</sup> See Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book*, 315-319. Schwartz's emphasis is on the Holy Family but not particularly on the Virgin Mary. He provides a helpful graph of the number, the media and dates of these works. He records 81 works in total but these do not include those which show the Virgin either on her own or with the child in her arms. The *Death of the Virgin* (1639), *Virgin with the Instruments of the Passion* (1641) and the *Sorrowing Virgin* (1661), for example, are not included in his survey.

painting *Holy Family with Angels* (1645) (fig.99). Here again the background is the carpenter's workshop. It is as if Rembrandt was playing with ideas of domestic happiness while still trying to evoke some idea of the mystery and foreboding which was so inevitably part of it all. The *putto* who descends, arms outstretched over the mother and child in a gesture of both blessing and protection in both the drawing *Holy Family in the Workshop* and the painting *Holy Family with Angels* prefigures, at the same time, in its cruciform pose, the future death of this child on a cross. A subtle detail seen only in the painting, which enhances the Virgin's role as mother but also anticipates her role as 'Queen of Heaven' has previously been unnoticed in the literature. In an uncharacteristically Rubensian touch, one of the background angels who emerges from the vivid depths of heaven in the upper left hand corner of the painting, carries in its right hand the floral wreath with which the Virgin will later be crowned (fig.100). Rubens incorporates this motif in his *Assumption of the Virgin* (1626) (fig.101). Despite the superficial innocence of this work, such a detail is another calculated use of Catholic iconography.

Maintaining its obvious link with the painting, the drawing *Holy Family Asleep with Angels* (fig.102) shows a singular interpretation of the scene. A human Joseph has flung himself on his back on the floor in exhaustion, seemingly worn by the magnitude of his task, while the Virgin and child sleep quietly behind. This drawing has been identified by Egbert Haverkamp-Begeman as unique for, in showing the Holy Family asleep together, Rembrandt has introduced a new iconographic theme not mentioned in the text or found in the artistic tradition.<sup>53</sup>

These works may have been made in response to Saskia's death in 1642, for they articulate the link between the human mother and child and their spiritual destiny. Rembrandt had used the presence of angels to announce the intrusion of the spiritual into the temporal many times in his depictions of Old Testament stories such as the etching *The Angel Departing from the family of Tobias* (1641) and the painting *The Sacrifice of Abraham* (1635).<sup>54</sup> He used them in his New Testament works where the Angel comes to warn Joseph that he must flee to Egypt with his wife and family or the divinely-inspiring angel who touches St. Matthew's shoulder in *The Evangelist*

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<sup>53</sup> See Egbert Haverkamp-Begeman, *Rembrandt Och Hans Tid: Människan I Centrum* (Rembrandt and his Age: Focus on Man) (Stockholm: National Museum, 1992/3).

<sup>54</sup> Image source: *The Angel Departing from the family of Tobias* (1641): Schwartz, *The Complete Etchings of Rembrandt*, B43; *The Sacrifice of Abraham* (1635); Schwartz, *The Complete Etchings of Rembrandt*, B35.

*Matthew and the Angel* (1661) according to a long tradition which guides the iconography of this saint. When Rembrandt introduces angels into his visualisations of the Holy Family he does so in a different manner. They are playful and familiar, yet portentous for they are an intimation of another celestial world.

Marian images such as these illustrate the complexity of the relationship between art and Protestant thought. Jaroslav Pelikan points out a particular work of Dürer's, a woodcut *Virgin with Saints and Two Angels* (c.1500) (fig.103) from his *Life of the Virgin Series*, which he says epitomises post-Reformation tension. The medieval depiction of Mary as Queen of the Angels and therefore, at least by implication, Queen of Heaven, and a reinterpretation of her in the light of Reformation principles of *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, and above all *sola fide* –the faith of a peasant girl “snatched by the initiative of God”, he observes, are hard to reconcile.<sup>55</sup> Rembrandt's many depictions of the Holy Family straddle the divide. They are at the same time both legitimate history subjects with wide aesthetic appeal and they revive earlier Marian tropes which are distinctively Catholic.<sup>56</sup> A Virgin mother approached by crown-bearing angels implies her heavenly status. A mother who would be assumed into Heaven to share a queenly throne with her son was a Mariology which Reformed doctrine did not accommodate.

The 1640s are the years in which Tümpel recognises a great depth to Rembrandt's hidden symbolism in his New Testament depictions. He sees Rembrandt as translating the symbolic language he had used in his early histories of ancient subjects and applying them to the newer histories of the New Testament.<sup>57</sup> They were also years when Rembrandt's creative activity suddenly declined. Tümpel explains this decline partly in terms of Rembrandt's personal responsibilities as a young widower and partly because of a change in the currently popular style of art. In his earlier work, Rembrandt had taken a stand against the classical tendency towards beauty and elegant form by dramatising action and movement, which Tümpel recognises in Rembrandt's great narrative paintings such as *The Blinding of Sampson* (1636) or the etching *Triumph of Mordechai* (c.1641).<sup>58</sup> By the 1640's, Tümpel notes, Rembrandt

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<sup>55</sup> Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, 163.

<sup>56</sup> His *Holy Family with St. Anne* (1640) for instance was, according to Tümpel, earlier identified by the Louvre as a genre scene, *Le Ménagement de Menuisier*. See Tümpel, *Images and Metaphors*, 295.

<sup>57</sup> Tümpel, 196.

<sup>58</sup> Image source: *The Blinding of Sampson* (Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main) 1636: Perlove and Silver, *Rembrandt's Faith*, 114. *The Triumph of Mordechai*, Schwartz, *The Complete Etchings of Rembrandt*, B40.



had become captivated by a stillness and introspection which had previously seemed to him, a fault in Renaissance paintings.<sup>59</sup>

Two paintings, *The Adoration of the Shepherds* (1646, London) (fig.104) and *Adoration of the Shepherds* (1646, Munich) (fig.105) follow an established pattern within the genre of infancy narratives. Both are night scenes which show the Virgin and Joseph with their son in a stable illuminated by lamp-light and surrounded by shepherds and animals; another work, *Holy Family with Painted Frame and Curtain* (1646) (fig.81), made in that same year, hints at disquiet. The Virgin and child are the focus. Rembrandt has distanced Joseph beyond the curtain in the shadows. Westermann sees this particular work as following Netherlandish convention by emphasising the earthly relationship between Christ and the Virgin. The curtain, she claims, 'reveals' the humble nature of Christ's birth in a way that would be particularly acceptable to Protestant culture for the Virgin is seen here not as a saint but as a model parent of Christ.<sup>60</sup> Rembrandt's religious works do not display themselves that simply; behind the relative domesticity of this scene can be found a disguised symbolism. Schwartz picks up this discordant note when he states that the use of a fictive curtain suggests that what the viewer is actually seeing is not as real as it might appear and that Rembrandt is in fact playing games with the viewer.<sup>61</sup> The curtain at the same time alludes to a domestic device which was used in the seventeenth century to protect important paintings within the home and hints at deeper meaning.

According to Martha Hollander, the practice of using trompe l'oeil elements in religious paintings developed in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Italy and the Netherlands as a motif for expressing a truth revealed.<sup>62</sup> Hedde Hoekstra notes the domestic origins of such a motif but suggests here that it serves a contradictory purpose by revealing a familial intimacy which, within a human situation, should remain concealed. At a stylistic level it was also a device which often served to emphasise the illusion of depth.<sup>63</sup> In this work it gains a multitude of meanings. Most importantly, it serves to stress Joseph's alienation. Placed, as he is, in deep shadow beyond the curtain, Rembrandt makes it clear that Joseph had no part in the divine

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<sup>59</sup> Tümpel, 188-189.

<sup>60</sup> Westermann, *Rembrandt*, 185-186.

<sup>61</sup> Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book*, 319.

<sup>62</sup> Martha Hollander, *Entrance for the Eyes: Space and Meaning in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002):72.

<sup>63</sup> Hidde Hoekstra, *Rembrandt and the Bible* (Utrecht, Magna Books, 1990): 287.

nature of his 'son'. The visual tradition, however, shows that the motif of a curtain, when applied to the Virgin Mary, was uniquely one of *revelatio*, emphasising not the human context of Christ's birth but the miraculous nature of Mary's motherhood of the son of God.<sup>64</sup> Given the legend that Mary was chosen to weave the red curtain of the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple – the curtain which later tore from top to bottom at the death of Christ – a red curtain in this context carries theological overtones.<sup>65</sup> It is at the same time a reference to the Annunciation and Mary's role in the history of salvation and an intimation of the death of Christ on the cross.

Visser 't Hooft notes that Rembrandt introduced new themes in the mid 1640s.<sup>66</sup> Rembrandt made two paintings and several drawings of another 'annunciation', the appearance of the angel to Joseph to warn him that he and Mary must leave immediately for Egypt. His initial visualisation of this event is found in a painting from 1645, *The Angel Appearing to Joseph in a Dream* (fig.106). This was followed in the early 1650s by another painting of the same subject made in c.1650-55 and two drawings of the same event (figs.107, 108), neither of which are dated but which are obviously iconographically connected to the painted works. It is a scene which is closely related to the events in the stable at Bethlehem and precedes both the 'Flight into Egypt' and the 'Rest on the Flight'. Rembrandt does not stray far from biblical text: "the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said 'Get up, take this child and his mother with you and escape into Egypt and stay there until I tell you because Herod intends to search for the child and do away with him'" (Matthew 2:13) That Rembrandt chose to create these scenes at the same time as the group of 'family' works, suggests an awareness that the early life of Christ was always shadowed by what was to come.

## The Fifties

In the first half of the 1650s Rembrandt began to experiment more intensely with night scenes, developing further the chiaroscuro that had long characterised his works. In these etched works he sought to deepen the emotional impact of his subject with a

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<sup>64</sup> For an explanation of the curtain as a motif in Marian art see Johann Konrad Eberlein, "The Curtain in Raphael's Sistine Madonna", *The Art Bulletin* 65:1 (1983): 61-77.

<sup>65</sup> For the story of Mary weaving the Temple veil, see Cartlidge and Elliott, 21-46. For the account of the tearing of the Temple veil at the time of Christ's death see Mark 15: 37-38.

<sup>66</sup> Visser 't Hooft, 14. Tümpel also recognises this watershed in Rembrandt's work. See "Rembrandt's Crisis and the Art of the 1640's" in Tümpel, ed. *Images and Metaphors* (London: Haus Publishing, 2006): 186-193.

play of bright light and intense darkness. The figures are given definition and depth in much the same way as colour and shading give depth and realism to a painting. An initial scene of *The Flight into Egypt, A Night Piece* (1651) (fig.109), was followed by a range of religious subjects such as *The Adoration of the Shepherds, A Night Piece* (1652) (fig.110). While there is an obvious development in technical expertise, the subjects themselves vary little in content from earlier drawings and etchings. There is an obvious depth of emotional involvement, intensified by the black and whiteness of the palette and Rembrandt's particular narrative approach. These scenes, which focus on the Virgin's place within the nativity narrative, could have appealed to both Protestant and Catholic audiences since the subjects they represent are found in the Gospel text.

In an etching made in 1652, Rembrandt, however, introduces a subject whose precedents are found only in earlier Catholic iconography. The *Virgin with the Instruments of the Passion* (1652) (fig.111) belongs to a particular type of devotion which pays homage to the Virgin as the suffering mother and will be analysed more closely in a further chapter. The biblical 'frame' for such themes is found in Simeon's prophecy to the Virgin when she brings Christ to the Temple "and a sword shall pierce your own soul" (Luke 2:35). The fulfilment of that prophecy is found in the passion and death of her son.

In 1654, Rembrandt brought together some of the themes he had followed all his life. He made a series of small etchings which encompassed the early life of Christ: *Adoration of the Shepherds with a Lamp* (fig.112), *Circumcision in the Stable* (fig.113), *Flight into Egypt, Crossing a Brook* (fig.114), *Virgin with a Cat and Snake* (fig.115), *Christ Disputing with the Doctors* (fig.116) and *The Return from the Temple* (fig.117). They record events from the early life of the Holy Family which appear disparate until each is observed closely. Each suggests a stage on Christ's journey from his birth to his declaration of his messianic role made when he was found by his parents preaching in the Temple. All but one, *Christ Disputing with the Doctors*, include the Virgin.

The *Adoration of the Shepherds with a Lamp*, superficially a Nativity scene, contains at the same time a hidden symbolism. Although Rembrandt commonly uses a lamp as illumination in his night scenes, here he appears to use the flame from the lamp with particular significance. The lamp which sheds its light over the Holy Family is an obvious reference to the parable of the lamp told in two different forms

in Luke's Gospel (Luke 8:16-18 and 11:33-36).<sup>67</sup> Rembrandt introduces an element of unease. The Virgin lies in the straw, her face is shown partly shadowed and she has a look of pensive contemplation rather than the maternal joy of his painted works. An element which appears to have been un-noticed in the literature is the presence of a snake, which appears from beneath the hem of her skirt. The emergence of a snake has been more widely recognised in a further etching from this series, *Virgin with Cat and Snake* and a later analysis of this etching will show the importance of this motif within the world of theology and art and its particular association with Catholic Mariology.

In his *Circumcision in the Stable*, Rembrandt comes closer to the humanity of the scene when he places the event in a stable where the Virgin could obviously be present. With his subtle use of light, (a diagonal shaft of darkness which shades the Jewish *mohel* and his attendants focuses a bright shaft onto the child, his parents and an observer), Rembrandt shows that the Christ child, although he is circumcised according to Jewish law, is no longer held in the darkness of that 'Old Law'; he is instead, the Messiah, the unrecognised fulfilment of Old Law promise. This work suggests a deeper appreciation and understanding of biblical text. The *Flight into Egypt*, *Crossing a Brook* repeats Rembrandt's earlier representations of the theme but concentrates again on the hardships of the journey and Mary's stoic acceptance of her role. The following work, *The Virgin with Cat and Snake* appears out of place within this group, as it fits neither a Nativity narrative nor a typological theme. The subject is a conflation of Marian tropes with an intense and complicated theology but it does fit a wider theme of episodes from the childhood of Christ which links these scenes and which will be explored in a further analysis.

The final two etchings, *Christ Disputing with the Doctors* and *The Return from the Temple*, announce the end of the nativity narrative and introduce Christ's messianic role. Christ's loss in the Temple, when he spent three days talking to the Doctors while his parents searched for him, was Mary's introduction to her son's mission. After the child had been found his mother asked him: "My child, why have you done this to us? See how worried your father and I have been looking for you." He responded, "Did you not know that I must be busy about my Father's affairs?" and

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<sup>67</sup> "No one lights a lamp and puts it in some hidden place or under a tub, but on a lamp stand so the people may see the light when they come in. The lamp of your body is the eye .... See to it then that the light inside you is not darkness. If, therefore, your whole body is filled with light, and no trace of darkness, it will be light entirely, as when the light shines on you with all its rays" (Luke 11: 33-36).

Luke's text goes on to say "But they did not understand what he meant" (Luke 3: 46-50).

Rembrandt's grasp of both biblical text and the visual tradition can be seen in the way he recognised the importance of this episode in Mary's life. He pictures the theological details involved in this foreshadowing of Christ's public ministry, the Messiah as yet unrecognised by audience and parents alike. Rembrandt shows this lack of understanding on his parent's part in the way in which he pictures the 'return'. Joseph grasps his son's hand tightly. It appears to be a particularly human response, that of a worried father to an errant son. Joseph's face is in darkness, shadowed by his hat, as if to emphasise his lack of recognition: he is not Christ's father and again Rembrandt partially alienates him from the scene. Christ and his mother, however, are bathed in light. As Christ turns to her to explain, his face is raised upwards as if he sees another future. Christ's hand clasps not Mary's hand but her wrist in a gesture which indicates his power and her submission. This is a motif with a long visual history. It can be traced to Greek and Roman legal practice and has a well-defined symbolic meaning. According to Moshe Barasch this gesture is an indication of taking possession of someone.<sup>68</sup> It is a gesture usually reserved for the female figure; the wife is in *manu mancipioque* (in a man's hands) as is the daughter whose hand is given by her father to a spouse.<sup>69</sup> In this case Rembrandt indicates in this subtle gesture the transference of power. Christ is the one who will lead; the son must no longer do the will of his mother, but that of the Father. Mary, in her turn, now represents the Church, the first of those disciples who will follow Christ's lead.

These works were all undertaken in an atmosphere of domestic difficulty and financial hardship. Rembrandt's de-facto wife, Hendrickje Stoffels, had that year (1654), been expelled from her church for living in 'whoredom' with Rembrandt.<sup>70</sup> She gave birth, a few months later, to their daughter Cornelia. Geertje Dirckx, the former mistress whom he had had committed to the Gouda house of correction, was

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<sup>68</sup> Moshe Barasch, *Giotto and the Language of Gesture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987): 134.

<sup>69</sup> This gesture is most often seen in pictures showing the dead being raised from Limbo where the souls are seen being drawn up by the wrist - an indication that the motion is by the power of God alone. Barasch illustrates its use within the work of Giotto and Duccio where the dead are summoned from Limbo by such a gesture. He states that the gesture is also one of guidance - this is how a woman was to be led by every man, including her lover. A polite host also led guests by the wrist to their proper place in the house or at the table by the wrist. See Barasch 134-135.

<sup>70</sup> *Rembrandt Documents*, 318.

released in that same year and she continued to harass him.<sup>71</sup> He was involved in a dispute with a patron, Diego d'Andrada, over a portrait of a young girl and he was in serious dispute with a neighbour Daniel Pinto over changes to the land on which their houses were built.<sup>72</sup> Ownership of his house was assigned to Rembrandt's son Titus in 1656 and the first sale of his possessions began in September of that year.<sup>73</sup> At the same time his debts were being called in and in 1657 Rembrandt was declared bankrupt.<sup>74</sup>

The 'set' of etchings relating to the early life of Christ were not the only etchings Rembrandt made at this time. There were further prints dated to that year which include the Virgin Mary. Rembrandt moved from recalling the early years of Christ's life to the final stages after his dramatic death on the cross. *The Descent from the Cross by Torchlight* (1654) (fig.118) shows the Virgin in the shadows as she lays out the shroud on a bier as Christ's body is removed from the cross. *The Entombment* (1654) (fig.119) places her in the dark recesses of the tomb sitting bereft at her son's feet as his body is laid in the tomb. In both these scenes Rembrandt focuses on the reality of death, the Virgin its compassionate witness.

Rembrandt made only nine further etchings, none of which included the Virgin Mary. His final etching *The Woman with the Arrow*, was made in 1661.<sup>75</sup> By 1658 his goods had been auctioned and his house had been sold.<sup>76</sup> He did, however, continue to explore the life of the Virgin in his later drawings. She appears in various studies for the 'Adoration of the Magi' and the 'Presentation in the Temple' and later, in 1656-57, Rembrandt returned to the subject of 'The Visitation' and made two further representations of the subject in *Two Studies of the Visitation* (c.1656-7) (fig.120) and *The Visitation* (fig.121). The second of these works repeats closely the central elements of his earlier painting.

Further drawings are busy affairs crowded with figures and loosely etched. All give only a rudimentary acknowledgement of Mary's presence.

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<sup>71</sup> *Rembrandt Documents*, 327.

<sup>72</sup> *Rembrandt Documents*, 310, 313.

<sup>73</sup> *Rembrandt Documents*, 342.

<sup>74</sup> Details of the events leading to the bankruptcy and the bankruptcy sale itself can be found in the *Rembrandt Documents*, 310, 313, 318.

<sup>75</sup> Image source: Schwartz, *The Complete Etchings of Rembrandt*, B202.

<sup>76</sup> *Rembrandt Documents*, 318-429

## The Sixties

The year 1661 was one of prodigious effort on Rembrandt's part. It was the year after his business affairs had been transferred into the hands of Hendrickje and his son Titus. It might be presumed that, given the desperate state of his financial affairs, his output was motivated as much by financial need as by artistic inspiration, yet his subjects hardly seem commercial. *The Rembrandt Documents* list sixteen paintings and one etching made in that year.<sup>77</sup> Ten of those paintings were of religious subjects: images of Christ, of apostles and of monks. Among these pictures was a half-length work of *The Sorrowing Virgin* (1661) (fig.122) and a history painting, *The Circumcision in the Stable* (1661) (fig.123).

Rembrandt's treatment of the 'sorrowing Virgin' draws overtly on Catholic iconography. The beads of a rosary can be seen looped over her right hand, an obvious link between Rembrandt's vision of the Virgin Mary and Catholic devotional practice. The authenticity of this detail has been questioned since a strip has been added to the original canvas on the bottom edge of the picture, perhaps as late as the nineteenth century. The rosary is largely (but not entirely) painted on this section. The emphasis in the literature focuses on the possibility that the rosary was a later addition. This work will be further discussed in a later chapter. Williams points out, however, that the remnants of a rosary are found in the original paintwork; this suggests that this piece may have been added to repair damage and simply replicates a detail found in the original work.<sup>78</sup> She sees this picture as having a precedent in the earlier etching of the *Virgin with the Instruments of the Passion* (1652), with its visual link to a Lucas van Leyden engraving of the *Virgin with the Rosary* (c.1520).<sup>79</sup>

The history painting *The Circumcision in the Stable* (1661) made in the same year includes the Virgin Mary as does the etched *The Circumcision in the Stable* (1654); both show the event taking place, no longer in the Temple, but in the stable.<sup>80</sup> More importantly, and only in this particular painting, the Virgin herself holds the child as the ritual takes place not, as would be expected, Joseph or a Temple elder. In this way Rembrandt has reinforced the importance of Mary in the infancy narrative in opposition to accepted Jewish Law and teaching. Perlove and Silver make the

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<sup>77</sup> *Rembrandt Documents*, 480.

<sup>78</sup> Williams, *Rembrandt's Women*, 236.

<sup>79</sup> Williams, 236.

<sup>80</sup> Image source: *The Circumcision in the Stable* (1661), *Circumcision in the Stable* (1654),

observation that this representation “conforms to a late medieval iconographic tradition of the Seven Sorrows of the Virgin” for it is in this event that Christ’s passion and death are foreshadowed in the first spilling of blood.<sup>81</sup> If this were so, this theme would surely have been one of popular Catholic devotion, of an appeal to Christ through the sufferings of his mother. Although the Presentation in the Temple is one of the Seven Sorrows because it predicts the sufferings that were to come, the Circumcision is not. Rembrandt’s illustration, however, does place the Virgin more prominently and gives her a role not generally assigned to her in similar representations.

Also attributed to the year 1661 is a drawing of the Presentation, an illustration of Lydius’ verses on the Presentation found in the *album amicorum* of Rev. Dr. Jacobus Heyblock and signed and dated by Rembrandt (fig.124).<sup>82</sup> The Virgin is featured prominently in the foreground, her hands clasped in prayer as the elderly Simeon, eyes closed, offers the child to God. The child himself is little more than a bright indication of light. This same subject marks the final work attributed to Rembrandt, *The Song of Simeon* 1669 (fig.125), which was found on his easel after his death. In a deeply spiritual evocation, Rembrandt paints Simeon in all his earthly frailty his gnarled hands stretched out to hold the luminous Christ-child placed upon them by the Virgin. It is no longer the Virgin’s response to Simeon’s prophecy that is the focus but the final declaration of Simeon’s own faith. The Virgin is a shadowy figure in the background. It is now thought that she might have been added later. Bredius describes her as having been ‘by another hand’.<sup>83</sup> If this were so it is to be wondered why this addition was made; perhaps some former pupil or friend made an effort to finish the painting, deciding that the Virgin’s presence in such scenes was so integral to Rembrandt’s representations that an omission was seen as an oversight – it is impossible to know.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Perlove and Silver, *Rembrandt’s Faith*, 332.

<sup>82</sup> *Rembrandt Documents*, 482-3.

<sup>83</sup> Bredius/Gerson, 612. Schama accepts that this painting featured three people including the Virgin (*Rembrandt’s Eyes*, 686); Perlove and Silver appear also, to accept the figures as presented (*Rembrandt’s Faith*, 329); Schwartz, suggests that this painting was “probably worked on by another hand” (*The Rembrandt Book*, 366).

<sup>84</sup> Schama makes the suggestion that the work might have been finished by Arendt de Gelder (Schama, *Rembrandt’s Eyes*, 683).



## Conclusion

It would be problematic to conclude that certain biblical themes and subjects can be related exclusively to specific events in Rembrandt's life. Even when such relationships appear likely it is equally possible that, as an artist, he may well have worked more intensely on a subject because he was thinking deeply about the artistic possibilities of the imagery itself rather than its relationship to events in his own life. The initial inspiration, however, may have sprung from some spontaneous recognition of biblical association played out in human events. Certain patterns can be discerned. The Virgin Mary seemed to become more important in Rembrandt's interpretations of biblical events around the late 1630s and the 1640s. Domestic scenes which centred on the Holy Family were grouped within a short space of time between c.1635 and 1646. Dozens of drawings which record Saskia's sickness and mothers with young children, quite possibly Saskia and her babies, are interspersed with sketches recognisably of the Virgin and child. It was a time when Rembrandt's own life, although outwardly successful, appeared blighted by death. As noted, his first three children died soon after birth in the late 1630. His mother died in 1640, Titus was born in 1641 and Saskia died in 1642. Whether domestic paintings of the Holy Family reflected Rembrandt's own experiences, hopes and values it is impossible to say although the visual evidence suggests this is the case.

Clusters of works showing an innovative approach to familiar subjects such as the Annunciation of the Angel to Joseph dated from c.1645–1652 can be found at various times. Other subjects provided background themes which Rembrandt returned to with varying degrees of intensity throughout his life. The Presentation in the Temple, for example, continued to inspire Rembrandt to the end of his working life. Other representations such as the Flight into Egypt appeared almost as regularly, sometimes as variations on the theme as in the Rest on the Flight into Egypt, but appeared to taper off in the 1650s. Scenes from the Passion and Death of Christ continued throughout most of his life, although there is a noticeable drop in the number of works on this theme, particularly drawings, during the 1640s. This coincides with the preponderance of 'family' scenes – of Mary and Joseph as a domestic unit – made at this time. Rembrandt returned to the subject of the Passion and Death again with a more intense engagement in the early 1650s, illustrating less familiar aspects of the biblical account and focussing on the pain of the Virgin rather than that of her son; but

by the end of the 1650s that too, had ceased. His last etching on the theme of the Passion was made in 1655. His last drawing was a 'Lamentation' made around 1660. Mary appeared in most, with various degrees of intensity.

There seems to be no explanation as to why Rembrandt all but ignored those most commonly portrayed events in the life of the Virgin, namely her 'Annunciation' and her 'Visitation' but placed such emphasis on the 'Presentation' and, to a lesser extent, the 'Flight into Egypt' and the '*Mater Dolorosa*'. It could be perhaps that the Annunciation and the Visitation preceded the birth of Christ and it was the events of Christ's life which most interested him.

At a deeper level, it could be said that Rembrandt was exploring images of the Virgin which were heavy with the weight of intellectual engagement and a searching faith. His depictions of the Virgin Mary express a knowledge of her place in the history of salvation which is deeper than a merely pious rendering of a familiar scene. These are subjects which suggest a knowledge of Catholic Mariology and devotion. It was through the medium of etching that Rembrandt challenges Reformed thinking. His four most important and controversial Marian works are etched: the *Death of the Virgin* (1639), the *Virgin and Child in the Clouds* (1641), the *Virgin with the Instruments of the Passion* (c.1652) and the *Virgin with Cat and Snake* (1654). It is as if the black and whiteness of the medium and the physical acts of cutting and shading allowed him the freedom to explore new meaning. It was also the medium which allowed him to experiment, to think visually, to alter and reassess his iconography and gave him the greatest opportunity to disseminate his own particular ideas.

There is an overwhelming feeling of disquiet, of sadness, of fear or apprehension in Rembrandt's inclusions of the Virgin Mary in his art, notably in his drawn and etched works. Despite the seeming happiness and domestic contentment of some scenes, particularly those of his painted works, there is inevitably a discordant note, a subtle prediction of things to come. While it is not possible to explore this in depth in this chronological survey, focussed analyses of specific works are intended to explore these ideas more exhaustively. Rembrandt appears to invest the Virgin's motherhood with his own fears but it could as easily reflect the fraught nature of such images in his own time. Mary was a divisive figure in a religious world which focussed its difference on the importance of her place in the history of salvation.

There may be another explanation. Hedquist has suggested a relationship between Rembrandt and the Franciscan Friars of his neighbourhood.<sup>85</sup> If that were so, he may have been both aware of and influenced by their devotional practices which centred on a reverence for the Virgin Mary as ‘Mother of Sorrows’, the Mater Dolorosa.<sup>86</sup> Most, if not all, of his Marian works can be seen to fit within that particularly Franciscan devotion, a series of episodes in the life of the Virgin known as the ‘Seven Sorrows of the Virgin’.<sup>87</sup>

Hedquist does not attempt to relate Rembrandt’s possible affiliation with the Franciscan order to the subjects of his art other than noting his recordings of monks themselves. There is, however, an interesting correlation. Rembrandt’s figure of the suffering Christ is, in most cases, curiously emotionless. Rembrandt gives the subsidiary figures, the onlookers, the task of intimating how the viewer should react. Most often that reaction centres on the person of the Virgin Mary. It is as if Rembrandt makes her suffering the focus of his work. In doing this Rembrandt departs from the powerfully talismanic evocations of the crucified Christ, removed from any quasi-natural setting, which were favoured by the Reformers and returns to the pre-Reformation and emotionally charged representation of his Netherlandish forbears Rogier van der Weyden, and Lucas van Leyden, which allow the sorrow of the Virgin a prominent role.

A Protestant typology does not allow for Rembrandt’s intense engagement with the subject of the Virgin Mary in his art; where it accommodates works which illustrate Christ’s divinity, his public life and his ministry, those which focus on the Virgin are either difficult or impossible to assimilate. As Schwartz notes, however, Rembrandt related to the Holy Family as an entity and on a very personal level. The work of the following section is intended to show that a more intensive study of some representative Marian works can be made by re-viewing them from within the context

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<sup>85</sup> Hedquist, “Rembrandt and the Franciscans in Amsterdam”, 20-49.

<sup>86</sup> Hamburg also makes this connection. See 100 n.39, 40.

<sup>87</sup> The Seven Sorrows of the Virgin are:

1. The Prophecy to Simeon.
2. The Flight into Egypt.
3. The Loss of Jesus in the Temple.
4. The Meeting of Jesus and Mary on the Way of the Cross.
5. The Crucifixion: Mary at the Foot of the Cross.
6. The Descent from the Cross: Mary receives the Body of her Son.
7. The Burial of Jesus.

of Catholic art and devotion. Given the paucity of verifiable historical detail available it would appear that such an approach should have an equal validity.

## SECTION II

### THE ANALYSES

## *The Annunciation, c.1635.*

### Introduction

This analysis of key works which define the unique position of the Virgin Mary in Rembrandt's art begins not with a major work but with a little-known sketch, *The Annunciation, c.1635* (fig.126). The subject of this sketch represents a long-established genre, a representation of the Virgin Mary at her first appearance in the biblical text when the angel comes to her and presents an invitation which would initiate Christian history – a call to become the human mother of God made man. Only two of the four Gospel writers allude to this story. Matthew does not tell of the visit of an angel, he says only that Mary “was betrothed to Joseph, but before they came to live together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit” (Mt. 1:18). It is Luke's brief text (Luke 1: 26-36) that tells of the visit by an angel to the Virgin Mary. It opens with a salutation from the angel “Rejoice so highly favoured! The Lord is with you” (Luke 1:29). It continues with a demurral and an admission of apprehension and ends with Mary's fiat: “I am the handmaid of the Lord ... let what you have said be done to me” (Luke 1:38). The importance of this early work lies not only in the particular scene it visualises but also in the theological problems the event itself presents.

The Virgin had already featured in a number of Rembrandt's earlier works. She first appeared in a painting, *The Presentation in the Temple (c.1628)* (fig.66), then in etchings such as *The Holy Family (c.1632)* (fig.70), as well as some later sketches, notably his *Holy Family Seated by a Window* (fig.75) and his *Virgin and Child Seated near a Window* (fig.76), both made around the same time as *The Annunciation (c.1635)*. These works reinforce Mary's position as a member of the Holy Family and as the mother of her son. In the *Annunciation* Rembrandt focuses for the first time on the Virgin herself, on the moment when her response to the heavenly summons establishes her place within the redemption narrative.

The Annunciation, according to Jaroslav Pelikan, was the most common representation of the Virgin Mary within the visual tradition. So important was it, he states, that all Mariology could, in one way or another, be illustrated by an artistic rendering of the theme.<sup>1</sup> It allowed for endlessly varied expressions of imagination.

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<sup>1</sup> Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, 81.

Shocked or demure Virgins and glorious angels bearing lilies or staffs or simply gesturing had aroused the religious or aesthetic expectations of the faithful for centuries.

Rembrandt's approach was familiar yet strangely different. Gone are the lily-bearing angels who populate most other renditions of this same scene. Rembrandt records biblical history with almost clinical accuracy. He bypasses the opening rhetoric of the angel and goes straight to the point of interaction. The Gospel tells us that Mary was greatly disturbed by the angel's message and asked how she, a virgin, could become a mother. The angel tells her "The Holy Spirit will come upon you ... and the power of the most high will cover you with its shadow" (Luke 1: 34-35). Rembrandt shows Mary's fear and the angel's response. The glorious spread of the angel's wings quite literally covers her as he holds her hand and places his other hand tenderly on her head to comfort her.

Such a precise recording of a scriptural event might have pleased the Reformers, but here Rembrandt undermines such acceptance by subtle references to Catholic theology. Reformed theology was by no means clear in its interpretation of the Annunciation narrative, for it raised questions which lay at the heart of both Luther and Calvin's disagreements with the Catholic Church – the status of the Virgin Mary in Catholic worship and devotion. At one level this scene fulfils the requisites for a 'history subject'; that is, it comes from the biblical text, it tells a story of historical significance and, as such, could be interpreted as a legitimate work within the parameters of a Reformed acceptance of the visual arts. At another level it is recognised as a 'Catholic' story, for it lays the foundation for the centuries of doctrine, liturgy and Catholic lore which have surrounded the mother of Jesus to the present day.<sup>2</sup>

## The critics

Rembrandt's sketch, made with a reed pen and bistre, is his only representation of the Annunciation and although noted, it is seldom discussed in the literature. It appears unusual that in his considerable review of Rembrandt's drawings, the only example of

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<sup>2</sup> Susan von Rohr Scaff, "The Virgin Annunciate in Italian Art of the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance" *College Literature* 29.3 (2002): 110.

.this subject which Seymour Slive includes is a sketch made by a student in 1650 and corrected by Rembrandt (fig.127).<sup>3</sup> Rembrandt's own sketch is not included.

Schwartz includes the drawing of the Annunciation but in a wider context, that of Rembrandt's fascination with biblical events in which "God's will was communicated to man through the visible intercession of angels."<sup>4</sup> He notes Rembrandt's use of angels as celestial messengers in various Old Testament stories, especially their centrality in Rembrandt's representations of scenes from the Book of Tobit (fig.128) and those which show Abraham's potential sacrifice of his son Isaac (fig.129). Angels are seen again in others of Rembrandt's New Testament works such as the etchings *The Annunciation to the Shepherds* (1634) or *Angel with Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane* (165-).<sup>5</sup>

It is not the heavenly petition but the motif of recognition which Anat Gilboa identifies as the focus of *The Annunciation* - Mary's recognition of both her destiny and of the divine nature of her future son. Gilboa notes that theologically this concept would have been acceptable to both Catholic and Protestant appreciations of Mary's role.<sup>6</sup> The Catholic nature of this scene is, however, the reason that Field suggests that Rembrandt was "not much attracted to the subject."<sup>7</sup> Perlove and Silver note that the Annunciation scene was particularly associated with Catholic devotions, with litanies to the Virgin which were "despised by Protestants." The reason they give is that Rembrandt depicted the theme only once because of the overtly Catholic nature of the subject.<sup>8</sup> Field suggests it might have been a preparatory sketch for a painting, but if it was, nothing ensued.<sup>9</sup> He notes, however, Rembrandt's departure from tradition by portraying the Virgin as more human and the angel as a "caring, protective being concerned for the shock that Mary is feeling and sheltering her with his wings."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Slive, *Drawings of Rembrandt* Vol. II, 384. This sketch of the Annunciation follows established lines for such imagery. The Virgin kneels, head bowed in front of a chair with an open book placed on a cushion before her. The angel appears, coming on a cloud of light with arms outstretched. There seems no iconographic connection between the two works other than the presence of both the Virgin and the angel.

<sup>4</sup> Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book*, 346-7.

<sup>5</sup> Image sources: *The Annunciation to the Shepherds* (1634): Schwartz, *The Complete Etchings of Rembrandt*, B44; *Angel with Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane* (165-): Schwartz, *The Complete Etchings of Rembrandt*, B75.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Gilboa, *Images of the Feminine*, 53.

<sup>7</sup> Field, *Rembrandt*, 341.

<sup>8</sup> Perlove and Silver, *Rembrandt's Faith*, 371.

<sup>9</sup> Field, *Rembrandt*, 341.

<sup>10</sup> Field, 341.



The absence of a finished work for which this sketch might have been made is not unusual for few of his drawings can be identified as preparatory studies for paintings or prints. They could be likened, according to Slive, to notes and ideas jotted down by a great writer.<sup>11</sup> An earlier scholar, Jakob Rosenberg, notes the preponderance of biblical subjects among Rembrandt's drawings and states that they were obviously not intended as preparatory sketches but were "independent and complete works ... which clearly manifest the artist's inner urge to deal constantly and intensively with religious subjects of the most varied sort."<sup>12</sup>

The value that Rembrandt himself placed in these sketches can be seen in the way he archived them – they were bound in books between blank pages. They were made and even catalogued for his private use.<sup>13</sup> Twenty-four books of his drawings and two parcels of his sketches are noted in his inventory of 1656. Some of these books are devoted to single subjects such as 'nude men and women' or 'views'. One item (236) is a "book bound in black leather with the best sketches by Rembrandt", (een boeck inswart leer gebonden met de beste schetsen van Rembrant (sic)).<sup>14</sup> It is, of course, not known whether the *Annunciation* was one of Rembrandt's 'best sketches', but it is clearly an independent and complete work.

Within its limited format, Rembrandt displays an understanding of theology and biblical text which is not easily seen in other artist's versions of the same scene. He looks back to the textual and visual tradition for inspiration, but his interpretation of this scene does not follow established canons. Only one writer appears to have attempted to identify a source for this drawing: J. L. van Rijckevorsel (1932) suggests either Rogier van der Weyden or Jan van Eyck (d.1441), based presumably on the more domestic settings of their compositions.<sup>15</sup> Different theological understandings of the *Annunciation* might well account for Rembrandt's apparent reluctance to engage further with the story, as some scholars have suggested, but they do not account for his unique interpretation in this drawing.

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<sup>11</sup> Slive, *The Drawings of Rembrandt*, ix.

<sup>12</sup> Rosenberg, *Rembrandt*, 99.

<sup>13</sup> Slive, *The Drawings of Rembrandt*, x.

<sup>14</sup> *Rembrandt Documents*, 367-379.

<sup>15</sup> Broos, B.P.J. *Broos Index to the Formal Sources of Rembrandt's Art*, 117.

## A history of the image

The role of Mary as co-operator in the incarnation story has inspired artists from the earliest days of Christianity.<sup>16</sup> It was through the medium of visual art and rhetoric that models for the Virgin Mary were developed and imposed.<sup>17</sup> Mary's role in religious history, her place as recipient of a divine summons from the Angel Gabriel – to be the Mother of God – led to the development of specific iconographic genres within the visual tradition. This imagery informed the faithful of her past and educated them in the theology of her present. Although Matthew's Gospel gives us the essential account (Mat. 1:18), only Luke's Gospel provides some detail. It is Luke who introduces and names the great co-performer in this visual drama: the angel, Gabriel.<sup>18</sup>

Seen in the context of human history the story of the Annunciation has all the elements of a scandal: a frightened woman, a cuckolded betrothed, an illegitimate pregnancy and a virgin birth. Instead it was to become the initiating event in Christian history, for it carried within itself the supreme miracle of the incarnation of Christ.

Luke's narrative of the Annunciation gives only the bare framework of the event. As has been noted, the story is re-told and embellished in a number of so-called 'infancy gospels' and Marian gospels which form part of the New Testament Apocrypha. It is from these early non-canonical texts that much of the visual iconography emerges. There is nothing, for instance, in the Gospel story that places

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<sup>16</sup> The evolution of Christian art and its distinction from pagan art begins from as early as the second century. While earliest impressions were those of Christ, images which illustrated stories from his life soon followed. "We of the modern era forget that, until the invention of the printing press, most of the faithful learnt about the Nativity, Crucifixion and life of the Virgin Mary from liturgies, sermons and church and funerary decorations". Christian art became all important, once the artist had imaged Christ; he then became what people pictured him to be. Cartlidge and Elliott, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha*, 10, 15.

<sup>17</sup> Cartlidge and Elliott, 15.

<sup>18</sup> The account of the Annunciation in Matthew's Gospel reads:

*His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph but before they came to live together she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.* (Mt. 1: 18).

Luke's Gospel reads:

*In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent to a town in Galilee called Nazareth to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the House of David and the Virgin's name was Mary. He went in and said to her 'Rejoice so highly favoured! The Lord is with you'. She was deeply disturbed by these words and asked herself what this greeting could mean, but the angel said to her 'Mary do not be afraid; you have won God's favour. Listen! You are to conceive and bear a son... Mary said to the angel 'But how can this come about since I am a virgin?' 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you' the angel answered 'and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow'... 'I am the Handmaid of the Lord' said Mary 'let what you have said be done to me'. And the angel left her (Luke 1:26-38).*

this event within a visual setting. Luke tells us only that the angel was sent to a geographical location, “a town in Galilee called Nazareth” (Luke 1:26).

Three different versions of the Annunciation event emerge from these apocryphal texts. One version found in both *Protovangelium* 11:1 (c.250-300) and *Pseudo-Matthew* 9 (eighth or ninth century) tells of the Virgin Mary engaged in her task of gathering water from a stream when the angel approaches her (130a).<sup>19</sup> A second and more influential version (*Protevangelium* 10:1-2; *Pseudo Matthew* 8) places the Virgin Mary in her house.<sup>20</sup> Here she is seen weaving the red wool for the Temple veil, a task she has been given by Temple elders in earlier sections of these two accounts. The iconography for this scene shows Mary seated on a chair at work, although she has sometimes risen from the chair as the angel’s appearance startles her (fig.130b). This iconography began to appear at the end of the fourth and the middle of the fifth century.<sup>21</sup> The Annunciation in which Mary is disturbed at her wool-work was the predominant image in the pre-Carolingian period and remains so in the Eastern Tradition today.<sup>22</sup> It is on this iconography, I later suggest, that Rembrandt draws for his own interpretation of the Annunciation.

The earliest representations of the angel appearing to the Virgin Mary come from the second century. Three works of early Christian art which appear to have portrayed the Annunciation have been found in the Roman catacombs. One, found in the catacomb of St. Priscilla, shows a messenger, an angel figure but without wings, standing before the seated Virgin, his right arm outstretched in greeting (fig.131).<sup>23</sup> This is of particular interest for it shows a disproportionately large Mary receiving the divine messenger seated on a chair “undoubtedly ... meant to indicate her superiority over the angel.”<sup>24</sup> These early works are without architectural detail.

It was not until the Carolingian period (roughly 500-1200) that, within the Western tradition, the emphasis began to shift from Mary as a woman occupied with

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<sup>19</sup>Cartlidge and Elliott, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha*, 78. This version is not of importance here, since it appears to have no relevance to Rembrandt’s interpretation

<sup>20</sup>The *Protevangelium* is a master text probably written in the second half of the second century. The author is unknown. Many manuscripts survive in the original Greek as well as many translations. The *Protevangelium* was the inspiration behind other Christian apocrypha most notably those which give accounts of the Virgin and the infancy of Christ. See Cartlidge and Elliott, 3-7.

<sup>21</sup>Cartlidge and Elliott, 79.

<sup>22</sup>Cartlidge and Elliott, 80.

<sup>23</sup>See Pelikan, *Mary, Through the Centuries*, 81-82.

<sup>24</sup>This work is a single fresco presented on an otherwise empty wall which emphasizes that the artist was directly concerned with the figure of Mary and the mystery of the Virgin mother. See Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999): 84-85.

weaving the wool for the Temple to Mary as a woman who both prayed and learned. She came increasingly to be seen in an interior setting with a book in her hand, either in a combination of both these motifs, with a spindle of wool in her left hand and an open book beneath her right hand, or, without the spindle of wool, simply standing before an open book of psalms on a lectern or sitting at prayer.<sup>25</sup> Northern European Annunciation scenes before 1430 invariably took place within a building although some showed the Virgin inside a room and the angel outside addressing her through a door or a window. An increased emphasis on realism forced the combined inside/outside format into disuse and in all Flemish paintings at least, from the 1430s Annunciation scenes took place inside.<sup>26</sup> This is the Annunciation scene, shown in Dieric Bouts *Annunciation* (1445) (fig.132), which persisted in the West.<sup>27</sup>

Although the Virgin had by now been iconographically secured within an architectural setting, the idea of how she actually conceived had to be addressed. The church, through the visual arts, answered graphically and literally. Early imagination focussed on sight. In an enamel-on-brass plaque made by Nicholas of Verdun in 1181 the Angel is shown directing his light straight into the eyes of the Virgin (fig.133). A fourteenth-century preacher, John Mirk, was able to declare in the 1380s that “Our Lady at hur salutacyon conceyvet by sight”.<sup>28</sup> Conception occurred through ‘seeing’ the angel rather than by hearing the angel’s words.<sup>29</sup> Later, the Virgin responded to the word of God as she *heard* it from the angel. It was through the ear that the impregnating word of God was delivered. In such visualisations, the dove of the Holy Spirit or the words of the angel descend towards her head and often towards her ear. Other more literal versions show a tube coming from the mouth of God and entering the Virgin’s ear - as she hears the word of God through the words of the angel, so she conceives. A particular form of this image, seen on the North Portal of the Marienkapelle am Markt at Würzburg Germany, shows the foetus of the Messiah moving down the tube and into the ear of the Virgin (fig.134).<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Cartlidge and Elliott, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha*, 80.

<sup>26</sup> John L. Ward, “A New Look at the Friedsam Annunciation”, *The Art Bulletin* 50: 2 (1968): 184-187, 184.

<sup>27</sup> Cartlidge and Elliott, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha*, 80.

<sup>28</sup> John Mirk, *Mirk’s festival: A Collection of Homilies*, ed. Theodore Erbe. Early English Text Society. O.S., 96, (London: Oxford University Press, 1905); reprint (Millwood, N.Y: Kraus reprint Company, 1973), quoted in Ellington, *From Sacred Body to Angelic Soul*, 126-127.

<sup>29</sup> Ellington, 127.

<sup>30</sup> Cartlidge and Elliott, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha*, 80-82.

To some extent, Marina Warner explains, ideas of the virgin birth have depended on knowledge of human reproduction.<sup>31</sup> She states that the Apostles Creed, finally drawn up in the eighth century, “expresses the idea that the Holy Spirit carried the whole child into Mary’s womb to be nourished there rather than to be quickened into life.”<sup>32</sup> When the Creed spoke of Christ as having been *conceived* by the Holy Ghost and *born* of the Virgin Mary, Warner suggests that “the Holy Spirit, like a mother, conceived the child and took possession of her body until the day of the child’s birth.”<sup>33</sup> She describes the *Book of Hours of the Chevalier de Rohan* (1410), where the Angel Gabriel kneels before the Virgin as the child Jesus wings his way down towards her in a beam of light. “The Virgin holds a baker’s tray, for she is the oven in which the bread of life, the baby Jesus, is to be baked.”<sup>34</sup>

Later artists found more delicate ways of visualising this intimate act. Lucas van Leyden’s angel directs a flying banderol printed with the seed-sowing words towards the Virgin (fig.135), while Fra Filippo Lippi (1406-1469) (fig.136) places a dove, the symbol of the Holy Spirit, on a strategically-positioned side-cabinet, issuing golden grains of heavenly semen into a discrete slit in the Virgin’s tunic approximate to where the artist imagined her womb to be.

Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) (fig.137) left such matters to the imagination. His formal annunciation shows the glorious angel kneeling in benediction before a somewhat aloof Virgin with one hand on the book on the lectern, the other hand raised in acknowledgement of the divine summons. Caravaggio’s concept of the event (1610) (fig.138) is more immediate and dynamic. He summons the emotion and the mystery of the event with an energetic and forceful angel, arm outstretched imperiously over the head of the Virgin. The angel appears almost coercive, as if he is issuing an order with his admonitory finger rather than an invitation. She kneels humbly before him, her arms crossed over her chest. Gabriel holds a branch of lilies, an acknowledgement of Mary’s virginity, but they are held firmly away from her as if he plans to reward her only if she complies with his invitation. Despite its robust composition, Caravaggio’s *Annunciation* follows the formula of Western tradition relying on the lily motif and on the traditional language of gesture.

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<sup>31</sup> Warner, *Alone of all her Sex*, 39.

<sup>32</sup> Warner, 38.

<sup>33</sup> Warner, 38. Warner does point out, however, that the new liturgy has adjusted this passage to read “by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary and became man”.

<sup>34</sup> Warner, 40. See Millard Meiss and Marcel Thomas, *The Rohan Hours* (New York: Braziller, 1973): folio 212.

Michael Baxendall codifies the language of gesture generally attributed to such scenes.<sup>35</sup> There are five successive spiritual and mental conditions associated with Mary in the 'Divine Colloquy' as the annunciation scene, the conversation between the angel and the Virgin Mary, is called. They were those of *Conturbatio* (disquiet), *Cogitatio* (reflection), *Interrogatio* (inquiry), *Humiliatio* (submission) and *Meritatio* (merit). All were recognisable by a particular gesture and movement and each could be identified readily by the observer (figs.139 a,b,c,d). The last of these, *Meritatio*, followed the departure of the angel and generally describes representations of the Virgin on her own which were no longer Annunciation scenes. Viewed as modes of acceptance of the divine invitation, some of these examples appear strangely coy and seductive. Within this hierarchy of gestures, Caravaggio's Virgin would be recognised as submissive, *Humiliatio*, for the hands crossed against the chest signify this condition. Rembrandt's Virgin, on the other hand, shows the gestures which register disquiet, *Conturbatio*, her hands are raised and held away from her body as if to ward off this heavenly intruder.

## Theological complexities

The Gospel story of the Annunciation is, as Beth Kreitzer describes it, a text which provides Christians with the basis of their belief in human salvation through the birth of Christ. With the Reformation, however, it became a source of conflict within the Christian community, for it brought a woman into a central role in salvation history, a position which caused difficulties for the Reformers.<sup>36</sup> The pivotal role this scene played hinged on the theological implications of the angel's salutation: *Ave Maria gratia plena, Dominus tecum* (Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you) (Luke 1: 28-29). Buried in the understanding of the angel's words were theological beliefs which lay at the heart of the Reformers' disputes with Catholic theology. Despite the fact that they had tended to diminish her role, they were, says Kreitzer, compelled to admit that, when confronted with this text, Mary was and remained in a special position.<sup>37</sup> Faced with the problem of conflicting ideologies, there was a subtle change in emphasis. Since the angel's approach to the Virgin Mary contained and

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<sup>35</sup> Michael Baxendall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988): 50-57.

<sup>36</sup> Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary*, 27.

<sup>37</sup> Kreitzer, 27.

sustained much of the Catholic doctrine that formed the basis of their ideological conflict with the Catholic Church, the Reformers were forced to consider her place within their newly-formed theologies.

The Reformers dealt with what they saw as a distortion of the biblical text by changing the focus of this event from the Virgin to her son. As Kreitzer points out, the Annunciation was often described by the Reformers as a *herrenfest*, a festival of the Lord and was celebrated for its Christology.<sup>38</sup> Mary as a figure herself faded into the background. Her importance lay only in her virginal conception and the reproductive capacity of her body.<sup>39</sup> Conversely, her betrothal to Joseph was seen by the Reformers to correct a Catholic emphasis on virginity, since God wanted to honour the state of matrimony as well. Mary was seen as a fruitful model for believers but her real importance lay in bringing Christ into the world.<sup>40</sup> This change of emphasis hinged on a new understanding of Luke's biblical text.

At issue was not only the use of the words in a prayer directed to the Virgin herself but also the meaning of the words themselves and their Catholic interpretation. The words "full of grace", as translated in Catholic usage, allowed an importance to the Virgin that the Reformers were not prepared to concede. In his only sermon on the subject of the Annunciation (1532), Luther sought to re-translate these words into what he believed was a more accurate reflection of their meaning. He writes that the angel came to the young woman and greeted her, "Hail" he said "gracious one", "the Lord is with you, you who are highly praised among women."<sup>41</sup> He does not use the German words *voll Gnade* (full of grace), for it suggested too active a role for the Virgin; he uses instead the term *holdselige* (lovely and gracious). This term affects the meaning and gives a passive or received sense to the greeting, diminishing its impact.<sup>42</sup> Luther then continues to articulate what was to become the dominant

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<sup>38</sup> Kreitzer, 28-29.

<sup>39</sup> The extent to which the Reformers diminished Mary's role in the incarnation story is shown by the various similes used to describe her role. Emile Mâle quotes a derisory remark made about the Virgin by a Reformer Constantine Copronymus: "When she bore Christ within her womb she was like a purse filled with gold. But after giving birth she was no more than an empty purse" (Mâle, 167) Pieter Florisz., a tailor from Gouda, compared the Virgin to a sack that had once held cinnamon and Robert Barnes an English Protestant was accused in 1540, of likening the Virgin to a saffron bag with the contents gone but a faint odour remaining. See Alastair Duke, *Reformation and Revolt in the Low Countries*, 42.

<sup>40</sup> Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary*, 28.

<sup>41</sup> Susan C. Karant-Nunn and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 39.

<sup>42</sup> Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary*, 32. See also Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary*, 367-376.

argument in his mariological discourse that Mary's grace was given and not earned. Since Mary was a recipient of God's grace, she was unable to obtain grace for others. One should seek grace from the one who gives it, he warns, not as the Catholics did by running to the Virgin in the hope of receiving more grace.<sup>43</sup> According to a Württemberg reformer, Andreas Keller, to address Mary as 'full of grace' was to give her honour due only to God. This was an error perpetuated by Rome, he explained, which "makes Mary an idol where she should only be praised as a creature."<sup>44</sup>

Kreitzer's intensive review of Lutheran sermons on the Annunciation shows a "continuous thread" of criticism about the Catholic use of the angel's opening salutation to the Virgin Mary as a prayer.<sup>45</sup> This opening salutation forms the first words of the *Ave Maria*, the prayer of praise to the Virgin which acknowledges both the Virgin's singular position as Mother of God and her role as mediator between God and humankind. The idea of a prayer directed to the Virgin was extremely troubling to the Reformers. It was not just a matter of honouring Mary for her own sake; it was also the possibility of such prayer being used as a means of appealing to her son through her offices. Luther and his followers rejected any notion of intercession or mediation through either the Virgin or the saints.<sup>46</sup> Neither Luther nor Calvin was able to admit man's ability to contribute to salvation in any way. Since both believed that salvation or damnation was immutably predestined from all eternity, what use was any intercession, they asked.<sup>47</sup> Luther never seemed able to fully resolve his relationship with the Virgin Mary. He appeared to know what he did not want, but he could not let go some of the practice of his early life as a monk. His theology regarding the place of the Virgin in the redemption narrative was predicated by two paradoxical beliefs:

I am to accept the child and his birth and forget the mother as far as this is possible, although her part cannot be forgotten, for where there is a birth there must also be a mother ... We dare not put our faith in the mother but only in the fact that the child was born.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks, *Luther on Women*, 40.

<sup>44</sup> Andreas Keller, *Ain Sermon auff dem tag der der verkündigung Mariae gepredigt zü Rottenburg Durch Andream Keller* (Augsberg: Heinrich Steiner 1524) quoted in Kreitzer, 33.

<sup>45</sup> Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary*, 32.

<sup>46</sup> Kreitzer, 32.

<sup>47</sup> Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion* Vol. II (London: Sheed and Ward, 1963): 7.

<sup>48</sup> Timothy Lull, ed. *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989): 228 quoted in George H. Tavard, *The Thousand Faces of Mary* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1996):113-4.



Yet the feast of the Annunciation, one of the great Marian holidays, remained on the Lutheran calendar; Catholic hymns in her honour were included in Lutheran hymn books and Luther himself extolled the words of the *Magnificat*, Mary's song of praise at the Visitation to Elizabeth, for they were Mary's acknowledgement of her own humility before God's grace.<sup>49</sup>

Calvin's appreciation of the Virgin of the Annunciation was limited to his acknowledgement of her humility. His translation of the angels' salutation to this girl, *Ave, gratiam consequuta* (You who have followed grace) again allows a distance between the understanding of Mary as fruitful receiver of God's invitation to a divine maternity and Mary simply as faithful follower. Calvin's interpretation, following that of Luther, stresses that Mary has no merit in herself; all she has is from God - the angel acknowledges solely her faith and fidelity.<sup>50</sup> He admits that Mary expressed some anxiety over the angel's request but it was not about God's invitation itself but only about how it would be accomplished.<sup>51</sup>

Calvin limits Mary's role to that of a model; it is for the faithful to accept with reverence what they do not yet understand and follow her example. They, like Mary should ponder God's goodness in their hearts.<sup>52</sup> Calvin's exegesis on the words "full of grace" is sceptical. He indicates a passage from the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 6:8) which speaks of Stephen (the first Christian martyr) as "full of grace" and notes that Christ alone has a complete fullness of grace.<sup>53</sup> Mary's grace is pure gift; it comes from God only for her faith. Her privilege for being the mother of God did not cause a "more complete or profound sanctification." Any prayer directed to the Virgin was seen by Calvin as against scripture; to ask her to obtain grace for anyone was no less than "execrable blasphemy", for God had predestined for all eternity the measure of grace for every man.<sup>54</sup>

Neither Luther nor Calvin dwells on the Annunciation, since that biblical episode appears to cause dialectical problems. As Tavard notes, Reformed practice quickly evolved into something that was even less Marian than either Luther or Calvin had envisaged. Reformed preachers became more willing to criticise Mary and even to

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<sup>49</sup> See Flanagan, *Luther on the Magnificat*, 2.

<sup>50</sup> Tavard, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary*, 119.

<sup>51</sup> Tavard, 121.

<sup>52</sup> Tavard, 122.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas A. O'Meara, *Mary in Catholic and Protestant Theology* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966): 133.

<sup>54</sup> Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, Vol. II, 12.

suggest she sinned.<sup>55</sup> The feasts of Mary vanished quickly from sight and Luther's interest in the *Magnificat* became a thing of the past.<sup>56</sup>

## Interpreting the iconography

Most artists interpret the initial moment in the Annunciation story when the angel appears and addresses the Virgin "Rejoice so highly favoured the Lord is with you" (Luke 1:29). This is the scene which can be so richly illustrated with glorious scenery, beautiful interiors, lily branches, generic gestures, and floating banderols - never more beautifully than by the early Netherlandish painters of Rembrandt's own visual tradition. Rembrandt, however, bypasses this opening rhetoric. He visualises, to a unique degree, a specific section of the biblical text.

Luke tells us that Mary "was deeply disturbed by these words and asked herself what this greeting could mean" (Luke 1:30). Having been told by the angel that she was to conceive and bear a son who will be called the Son of the Most High, she asked how this could be, since she was a Virgin. The angel explains: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you ... and the power of the most high will cover you with its shadow" (Luke 1:34-35). These words are followed by what Warner describes as "the most precious speech in Mariology for it implies her innocence and virginity: "How can this be since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:3-4). Rembrandt acknowledges her struggle and implies her consent. He describes both the implications of the message and the enormity of the fear.

With the swift, sure strokes of his pen, he visualizes the scene. Mary, her face averted from the 'heat' of the angel, slips forward off her chair.<sup>57</sup> Her hands are raised in a gesture of shock, fear or even self-defence. The work with which she has been occupying herself - and I would suggest here that it is the wool she is weaving - falls from a finely articulated tangle on her lap to two bobbins on the floor beside her.

Dominating the sketch is the glorious span of the angel's wings. This angel is not "the usual gorgeous official on a solemn diplomatic mission", as Field describes it.<sup>58</sup> Rembrandt's Gabriel is imposing but extraordinarily intimate. The breadth of his

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<sup>55</sup> Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary*, 24.

<sup>56</sup> Tavad, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary*, 117.

<sup>57</sup> Early theologians decided that the element from which angels were composed was that of fire.

<sup>58</sup> Field, *Rembrandt*, 341.

wings encloses the scene. Mary is visually ‘covered’ as the Gospel tells us she was; she is contained within their shadow.<sup>59</sup>

This over-arching of the angel’s wings has a direct relationship to Old Testament biblical text. Paul Haffner links the story of Mary’s Annunciation to the story of Moses and the tent of Yahweh (Ex. 40: 1-38). He speaks of the words “The cloud covered the tent and the glory of Yahweh filled the tabernacle” (Ex. 40:34) as foretelling this pivotal event in New Testament history. In her turn, he says, “Mary was the object of this same double theophany which is described in the Old Testament reading: a presence from above that signals transcendence and a presence of the Lord from within.”<sup>60</sup> Such biblical typologies which link the Old and New Testaments would probably have come easily to Rembrandt, for his deep knowledge of both books of the Bible is explicated in the accurate and intense reproductions of biblical scenes found throughout his *oeuvre*. His dependence on the Bible for primary inspiration is well recorded.

The tent-like covering of the angel’s wings re-vivifies the Old Testament reading and expands the theological dimensions of the New Testament scene. Nowhere has the Virgin been more tenderly impregnated than in this scene. As the biblical passage acknowledges her fear, so also does Rembrandt’s angel. The angel bends over the Virgin with a look of concern. This scene is unique for the angel physically touches Mary. It is not just a token gesture; he touches her with exquisite gentleness. He takes her left hand and holds it in his as if to comfort her and give her strength, as he places his right hand on her head. Such a gesture has great importance within the Christian tradition. It is a gesture of comfort but much more powerfully, it is a gesture of blessing. It is also a gesture which implies a transference of power. The ‘imposition’ of hands is of such importance in this scene that it needs further explanation.

The imposition of hands is a symbolic ceremony that has come down from ancient times.<sup>61</sup> It is a ritual act in which a priest or religious functionary places one or both palms down on the top of another person’s head, usually while saying a prayer or

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<sup>59</sup> “And the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow”, Luke 1: 35. There is an obvious visual reference here also to the Psalms: ‘I shall take shelter in the shadow of your wings’. Psalm 52: 1.

<sup>60</sup> Paul Haffner, *The Mystery of Mary* (Hertfordshire: Gracewing, 2004): 30. For an in-depth analysis of the words spoken by the angel and their relationship to the many ‘annunciations’ which took place within the Old Testament stories see Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister, A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York, London: Continuum, 2003): 247-258.

<sup>61</sup> “The imposition of hands is a symbolic ceremony intended to communicate some favour, quality or excellence, mainly of a spiritual kind”. See Moshe Barasch, *Giotto and the Language of Gesture*, 117.

blessing. The imposition of hands was first practised in Judaism and was adopted by Christianity. The religious aspect of this ceremony appeared initially in the consecration of Aaron and his sons to the office of priesthood.<sup>62</sup> It is a gesture which particularly expresses the sacramental rites of the church. Within the Catholic Church, for instance, it is used in the sacrament of Confirmation. The imposition of hands constitutes the essential matter of the sacrament; it is the moment when the power of the Holy Spirit comes upon the recipient who is invested with the gifts that power brings. Again that same imposition of hands imposes the power of the priesthood on those found worthy of the office.<sup>63</sup> There is no doubt that Rembrandt was aware of the full import of this gesture; he uses it later when he paints Jacob blessing the two sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Menasses (*Jacob Blessing the Children of Joseph* c.1656) (fig.140) a story of patriarchal transference found in the Book of Genesis (Gen. 48:14-18). It must be noted that this same sacramental importance did not apply to the Reformed Churches. According to Calvin, only two sacraments were valid, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Neither of these required an imposition of hands. The remaining five sacraments were known to him as the 'Five False Sacraments', devised and established by man for his own benefit. Calvin was particularly scathing about the imposition of hands. Where he acknowledges that this was the way Paul blessed those he called to serve the church, Calvin did not see it as any more symbolic than kneeling, raising the hands or any other gesture used in prayer.<sup>64</sup>

Rembrandt has used this sacramentally powerful gesture to illustrate the investment of the 'power of the Most High' into the physical body of Mary. Something happens. The shock on Mary's face shows as a physical reaction to the power the angel imparts, a sensation which appears to course through her body from the pressure of the angel's hand on her head. The dense working over her chest suggests that this is where the sensation is felt, in the heart, the centre of her being. A

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<sup>62</sup> Leviticus 8: 1-36.

<sup>63</sup> Within the Church of Rome, since the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus, it has been noted that the laying-on of hands for confirmation, for the ordination of deacons and priests and over the offerings for the celebration of the Eucharist is a primary symbol of the sacrament. It is known as an *epiclectic* gesture. While calling on the Holy Spirit it invokes the power of God and is one of the oldest and most significant liturgical gestures. See Peter E. Fink, ed. *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1990): 496-497.

<sup>64</sup> Calvin held that a "sacrament is a seal by which a covenant is sealed". It was not possible for man to establish a sacrament for it was not in man's power to do so. He devotes a chapter in his *Institutes* to defining his theology about the validity of Catholic sacraments stating that they have been falsely used and invented by the "rashness of men". The 'Five False Sacraments' were Confirmation, Holy Orders, Matrimony, Penance, and Extreme Unction. See John Calvin of Noyen, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing, 1975): 124-175.

source of light is suggested only by the slight hatching to the right of the Virgin's face as she turns away and to the left side of that of the angel. Rembrandt hints at a power that burns between the body of the angel and that of the Virgin. There is a jagged radiance between the two bodies, seen in the spontaneous zigzag curve. It is active, physical and frightening; it is certainly not gentle and acquiescent. The act of incarnation depended on Mary's acceptance of the angel's message and that acceptance came at a cost. It is these deeply important truths that Rembrandt manages to convey.

Such a depth of angelic intimacy is seen to a greater degree in a later work, Rembrandt's *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* c.1659 (fig.141). The fight is only intimated. Jacob, his hip dislocated, holds the angel tightly clasped, his eyes closed in exhaustion. The angel holds him tenderly, a gentle hand behind his neck the other on his dislocated hip, with what Simon Schama describes as a "lover's urgency".<sup>65</sup> Yet there is a link between this painting and Rembrandt's Annunciation sketch. There is a similar intensity of light between the figures, though in full colour, it is more obvious. There is a similar spread of wings, a similar contortion of the body as the central figure is both drawn to and shrinks from the heavenly messenger. There is a covert sensuality in Rembrandt's angels; they are physical, passionate and ambiguously sexual. It is as if Rembrandt himself struggles with the physical reality of this world and the spiritual possibility of the next.

The sweep of the angel's wings in Rembrandt's *Annunciation* has something of the quality of a particular work by Caravaggio, *Matthew and the Angel* (1602) (fig.142). There is a similarity in the way that the wings of Caravaggio's angel enclose the ungainly figure of the seated saint. More pertinent is the way the angel interacts intimately with the obviously startled Matthew; he leans against Matthew's shoulder while he moves Matthew's right hand across the written page describing a divine intervention in much the same way as Rembrandt's angel does with its gentle presence. Schwarz suggests that Rembrandt could have known of this work through Lastman who was in Rome when this painting was put in place in the church of San Luigi Dei Francesi.<sup>66</sup> Lastman is seen to have used some of Caravaggio's style in works being made in his studio when Rembrandt was a pupil.<sup>67</sup> In his own painting

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<sup>65</sup> Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes*, 620.

<sup>66</sup> Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book*, 346.

<sup>67</sup> Schwartz, 346.

of the Annunciation c.1618 (fig.143), however, Lastman adopts the traditional motif and situates his angel descending on a cloud towards the praying Virgin.

In Gilboa's analysis of Rembrandt's Annunciation sketch, she claims that Mary has been reading the Bible which drops to the floor at her feet as she reacts with shock to the angel's visit. She states that the Bible can be seen lightly etched at her feet.<sup>68</sup> It is not, however, obvious. There is a shape under the right elbow of the Virgin which could be more readily interpreted as a book with ribbon markers, but it could as easily be a piece of weaving with a fringed end. If the presence of a book could be identified it would tie Rembrandt's visualization to the Western tradition, where the Virgin is shown most often either reading, or with a book on the floor beside her.

A more obvious motif, the two bobbins that have fallen from the Virgin's knee, suggests that Rembrandt has gone back to the earlier apocryphal tradition with which he was obviously familiar, since several of his Marian images are found exclusively in those texts.<sup>69</sup> This reading would suggest that he places Mary at home, as the weaver of red wool for the Temple veil, exactly as she is described in the *Protevangelium* and *Pseudo-Matthew*. This interpretation is substantiated not only by the two bobbins of yarn on the floor beside her, but also by the startled and fearful expression and Mary's position. As in those earlier versions which illustrate the apocryphal text, the Virgin not so much rises as the angel appears but slips off the chair to the floor, a common motif in such representations.<sup>70</sup> In a homely touch, a discarded slipper lies near the leg of the chair. Whether the Virgin stepped out of the slipper is unclear, but its deliberate inclusion both implies a domestic setting and adds to the sense of shock and confusion. At her feet there is another domestic detail; a rough outline of a small animal, either a cat or a dog.

John Durham identifies a dog in this sketch and remarks on the number of times Rembrandt places a dog within biblical scenes. He sees them as a humanising motif, an indication that these are real people living in the real world.<sup>71</sup> But there could be a deeper meaning. Dogs, because of their watchfulness and fidelity, have become accepted as symbols of these virtues. This is clearly shown in the story of Tobias and

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<sup>68</sup> Gilboa, *Images of the Feminine in Rembrandt's Work*, 53.

<sup>69</sup> Rembrandt's many images of the Flight into Egypt and his *The Death of the Virgin* for instance, depict scenes described only in the New Testament Apocrypha.

<sup>70</sup> Cartlidge and Elliott, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha*, 79.

<sup>71</sup> Durham, *The Biblical Rembrandt*, 42-43.

the Angel, when a dog provides Tobias with faithful companionship (Tobit 6:2).<sup>72</sup> Rembrandt appears particularly drawn to this story, for he records this scene and those of Tobias' father Tobit, also accompanied by a dog, many times, in all media.<sup>73</sup> Rembrandt may also be using the dog as an indication of Mary's faithfulness and her willingness to accept the will of her God. The presence of a dog would link this scene also with his painting of the following scene in the biblical text, the visit of Mary to her cousin Elizabeth (*The Visitation*, 1640) (fig.144) which Rembrandt later paints. In front of the scene where Elizabeth greets Mary, there is a small brown dog.

But this sketchy outline in Rembrandt's *Annunciation* may as easily be a cat.<sup>74</sup> Rembrandt uses a cat a number of times in connection with scenes of the Holy Family. There is a cat present in his *Holy Family with St. Anne* (1640) (fig.79), in his *Holy Family with a Curtain* (Kassel) (1646) (fig.80) and later, in his etching *The Virgin with Cat and Snake* (1654) (fig.115), a cat pulls at the hem of the Virgin's gown. Given the malevolent demeanour of the cat in each of these works they could be interpreted as motifs anticipating the future for Mary's son. A cat is also found in other representations of the Annunciation. In Lorenzo Lotto's *Annunciation* (c.1534) (fig.145) for instance, a startled cat runs from the presence of the angel. In Federico Barocci's (1626-1612) *Annunciation* (1592-1596) (fig.146), a benign cat lies asleep on a cushion in the foreground. A more obvious source for identifying this shape as a cat is found in Rembrandt's teacher Pieter Lastman's *Annunciation* (fig.143). Here a cat can be seen prowling around a dish of cloth which spills out onto the floor. In Rembrandt's drawing the spools of wool lying at the Virgin's feet could likewise suggest a domestic setting and a more likely explanation for the presence of a cat. The sketchy outline is then more easily interpreted as a cat preparing to play a game with the wool.

By recording this scene within a naturalistic setting, Rembrandt, Tina Beattie observes "passes over images of a transcendent virgin in favour of an earthly woman given, with total acquiescence, an unearthly task."<sup>75</sup> Mary, she says, "has been

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<sup>72</sup> The Old Testament text reads: "The Boy left with the angel and the dog followed behind him" (Tobit 6: 2).

<sup>73</sup> See etchings: B42, B43 (Schwartz, ed. *Complete Etchings of Rembrandt*). Drawings: 196, 419, 474, 501 (Slive, *Drawings of Rembrandt*).

<sup>74</sup> This object is too sketchily drawn to be positively identified. The cat is usually interpreted negatively as a symbol of laziness and lust. There is however the story of the *gatta della Madonna*, the cat which gave birth to a litter of kittens in the stable at the same time the Child Jesus was born. See George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961): 14.

<sup>75</sup> Tina Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate* (London: Continuum, 2002): 98.

effectively neutered by the Church Triumphant, she has been disinvested of her carnality.”<sup>76</sup> In this drawing Rembrandt returned the Mary of theology to her physical body. This becomes even more apparent when his representations are placed beside Counter-Reformation images of the Virgin. Barocci, for example, with whose works Rembrandt was known to be familiar, presents a typical example of a theologically correct, aesthetically beautiful but physically detached *Annunciation*, quite different from Rembrandt’s sole interpretation. Other than perhaps emulating Lastman’s inclusion of a cat, Rembrandt does not appear to take inspiration from his former teacher’s *Annunciation*. Lastman’s representation is generic and distinctly Catholic. The angel stands apart, dressed in a dalmatic, a robe worn by deacons of the Catholic Church; the Virgin appears pious and submissive. The Catholic artist Paulus Bor (1600-1669), probably in response to the threat to Catholicism from Reformist zeal, presents a more devotional image. In his *Annunciation* (1620) (fig.147) his sycophantic angel is again dressed in a dalmatic.<sup>77</sup> As the angel touches the Virgin’s wrist a shower of rose petals accomplishes the incarnational deed. Viewed again in comparison to these and the work of other contemporary artists, such as that of Hendrick Terbrugghen (1629) (fig.148) who shows a gloriously draped angel, lilies in hand, beneath the dove of the Holy Spirit and a later work by Godfried Schalken (c.1660) (fig.149) whose wingless angel appears from the clouds, Rembrandt’s *Annunciation* is distinctively different.

## Conclusion

There could be many reasons why Rembrandt chose to represent the Annunciation, such an important event in the life of the Virgin Mary, only once. Perlove and Silver suggest that the recognisably ‘Catholic’ nature of the theme is the reason for

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<sup>76</sup> Beattie, *God’s Mother, Eve’s Advocate*, 98.

<sup>77</sup> The depiction of saints (and in the case of Bor’s and Lastman’s Annunciations) in clerical regalia, most often the vestments worn during the Mass, that is the dalmatic, worn by deacons, and the chasuble, worn by priests, became a distinctive typology in the post-Reformation age. Xander van Eyck points out those directives from the Council of Trent (1548-1563) which stated that art should focus on the central tenets of Catholicism and maintain the dignity of those depicted. Emphasis should be on articles of faith and Catholic forms of worship such as the sacraments, the worship of the Virgin Mary and veneration of the saints and angels. A Catholic identity became so important in depicting the primacy of Catholic worship over that of the Reformed churches that God himself came to be identified as the pope, dressed in Papal vestments with both cope and papal tiara (Van Eyck, *Clandestine Splendor*, 14-15, 92). For the directives on art made during the final session of the Council of Trent (1563) see H. J. Shroeder, *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (London: B. Herder Book Company, 1950): 214-217.



Rembrandt's reticence.<sup>78</sup> A review of his work, however, shows that Rembrandt concentrated his interest on the Virgin Mary's appearance in the Passion narrative. The early indications of her biblical presence: the Annunciation, the Visitation and the Finding of Christ in the Temple are touched on just briefly. Representations of the Holy Family invariably included motifs which prefigure the Passion. It is as if the story of the Passion and Death of Christ was the great central theme of Rembrandt's New Testament *oeuvre*. The Virgin's presence as a subsidiary figure and sometimes as the focus of a work herself, appeared to allow him a freedom to express emotions and feelings with which he could identify and which appeared almost as a counterpart to events in his own life.

For Rembrandt, any confessional implication which might be attributed to his drawing of the *Annunciation* may have been secondary to a desire to re-create his own version of Mary's human response to such a terrifying summons. His seemingly endless curiosity to record biblical events in human terms is well noted. Here he concentrates not on Mary's humble acquiescence, which was the central tenet of Luther and Calvin's beliefs about the Virgin Mary, but on her fear and her doubt. Mary's fear and doubt had theological implications for the Reformers. Calvin acknowledges that Mary's response to the angel expressed some anxiety, but Mary's role in Protestant teaching was limited to one of simple faith and humble submission.<sup>79</sup> Rembrandt's interpretation may suggest that he consciously chose to illustrate that more controversial moment when the Virgin was physically impregnated by the Holy Spirit through the message of the angel in order to stress, not Mary's abject humility, but rather the struggle that that *fiat* cost her.<sup>80</sup>

I suggest that Rembrandt takes some of his textual and visual inspiration not from Western iconographic tradition but from the story of the Annunciation found in the apocryphal writings and still held in the Eastern tradition. It is in this tradition that the story of Mary weaving the red wool is found and her image illustrated in myriads of Byzantine reproductions, in icons and mosaics, sculptures and manuscripts.

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<sup>78</sup> Perlove and Silver, *Rembrandt's Faith*, 371.

<sup>79</sup> Tavad, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary*, 121. Calvin does not agree, however, with those who would later accuse the Virgin of sinful pride (*imperium, ambitio*). In a later episode when the Virgin asked her child why he stayed behind at the Temple and caused his parents such sorrow (Luke 3:46-50), Calvin apologised for her, saying "The weariness of three days was in that complaint". See William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin, A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988): 123.

<sup>80</sup> 'Fiat' is the Latin word for "let it be done", the response that Mary gave to the angel to indicate her willingness to conceive.

Rembrandt's Virgin does not appear to carry an easily recognisable prayer book as Gilboa has suggested, but she has certainly dropped two bobbins of yarn beside her on the floor. The manner in which Rembrandt reinterpreted the iconography from this tradition may show some influence from the work of Caravaggio but little, if any, from his own Northern tradition. Rembrandt's sketch of the *Annunciation* is stark and intuitive; it is a drawing, stripped to the essentials – there is only an angel, a woman, a chair, two bobbins of wool, a discarded slipper and a cat or a dog. He uses the power of the angelic messenger to indicate the human struggle. His Christ was not incarnated in some outer holy space but deep inside the warm body of a woman and Rembrandt shows the mystery and the fear.

It is the paradox this event articulates which excites the imagination. The relationship between necessity and free will is the dilemma which Pelikan sees played out in the story of the Annunciation.<sup>81</sup> Added to that is the definition of Mary, cast, as he says, “by a deadly combination of nature, creation and fall” in the passive role of submissive vessel.<sup>82</sup> Reformed preachers responded to this dilemma with difficulty. Their belief in predestination made the question of free will a dialectical predicament. Mary became important only in human terms; she was held up to women as an example of the way they should behave, submissive to God, their husbands, the clergy and the hierarchy of the church.<sup>83</sup> Where Catholic belief would allow her the element of choice evidenced in her reply to the angel's invitation “Let what you have said be done to me” (Luke 1: 38), Protestant belief saw her as ‘captive, subject and slave to the will of God.’<sup>84</sup> The role of the Virgin Mary in this drama draws a fine line between the sacred and the secular, the Catholic and the Protestant. She is at the same time the finest being creation could offer, a strong, faithful and resilient woman and a

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<sup>81</sup> Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture*, 83.

<sup>82</sup> Pelikan, 83.

<sup>83</sup> Pelikan, 86.

<sup>84</sup> Calvin's ideas on predestination are set out in *Institution III* where he states “Since the disposition of all things is in the hand of God and he can give life and death at his pleasure, he dispenses and ordains by his judgement that some, from their mother's wombs are destined irrevocably to eternal death in order to glorify his name in their perdition”: John Calvin quoted in Bernard Cottret, *Calvin*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995): 322.

On the subject of free will Luther argues his ideas in his “The Bondage of Will”, written in refutation of Erasmus' *Diatriba*. In it he states: “In relation to God or in matters pertaining to salvation or damnation, a man has no free choice but is captive, subject and slave of the will of God or the will of Satan”. See Eric Lund, ed. *Documents from the History of Lutheranism 1517-1750* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002): 48-50.

Calvin denounces also the “the illusion of the person who believes himself to will when God is willing through him”. See Cottret, *Calvin*, 312.

model of submission, bending not only to the will of God but to the will of those who would impose her as a model for either cause.<sup>85</sup>

The importance of this single drawing in terms of Rembrandt's *oeuvre* cannot be overstated. These works seldom represented studies for finished works; they were spontaneous reactions to thoughts and ideas and so represent a more intimate link with Rembrandt's own creative process. In his *Life of Rembrandt* (published 1718-1721), Arnold Houbraken (1660-1719) speaks of Rembrandt's wonderful ability to capture the momentary appearance of emotions as "a rare and natural talent."<sup>86</sup> As Otto Benesch points out, many of Rembrandt's most fugitive drawings are complete works of art.<sup>87</sup> Rembrandt's *Annunciation* was a complete work of art, he would never return to that subject again. Whether this was because it presented too Catholic a subject as Field and Perlove and Silver assert, it is impossible to say. His attraction to more specifically Catholic subjects in later works suggests that this is not the complete answer.

An identification of this work as definitively Protestant or Catholic in its subject and content is contestable. When Rembrandt depicts the Virgin in an episode from within the biblical text, an argument for a legitimate 'history' subject can be made. This sketch could therefore conform to a broad acceptability for religious art within the religio-political dictates of the Protestant world. However, it can be shown that the *Annunciation* was not a subject that was embraced by Reformed preachers because it incorporated theological issues which brought them into direct conflict with Catholic belief. Nor was Rembrandt's treatment of the subject 'historical' in so far as it was a simply a passive recording of an historical event. His interpretation was shockingly realistic and alive with doctrinal anticipation.

Barbara Haegar warns of the difficulties in attributing a specific confessional identification to biblical representations based on the work itself. A viewer's response, she says, depends on his or her familiarity with Catholic or Protestant exegesis or

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<sup>85</sup> Where Catholic doctrine acknowledges the Virgin as the Mother of God and worthy of honour for that exceptional role, Protestant thought acknowledges only her human faith. Luther describes this biblical episode as a "happy and charming gospel ... for Mary had such high faith, the equal of which is not found in the scriptures." Luther is concerned only to stress Mary's humanity and her dependence on God's work in order to be a comfort and example to the faithful. See Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary*, 29-31.

<sup>86</sup> Arnold Houbraken, 'Life of Rembrandt' (*De Groote Schouburgh der Nederlandtsche Konstschilders en Schilderessen 1718-1721*, republished in *Lives of Rembrandt*, Sandrart, Baldinucci, Houbraken, London: Pallas Athene Press, 2007): 51-94.

<sup>87</sup> Otto Benesch, *Rembrandt as a Draughtsman* (London: Phaidon, 1960): 6.

doctrine. The burden of interpretation rests with viewer and their knowledge of the subject as defined by their church.<sup>88</sup> However, the ‘Catholicity’ of the Annunciation as a subject is well recognised. All the commentators acknowledge this. While no confessional bias can be interpreted from a single work, Rembrandt’s further realisation of Marian themes shows a growing awareness of Mariology which had no counterpart in Protestant belief.

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<sup>88</sup> Barbara Joan Haegar, “The Prodigal Son in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century Netherlandish Art: Depictions of the Parable and the Evolution of a Catholic Image” *Simiolus*16:2-3 (1986): 138.

## *Holy Family, 1633-35*

### Introduction

At much the same time as Rembrandt made his quick sketch *The Annunciation* (c.1635) he was working on his first large-scale history painting, the *Holy Family* (1633-35)<sup>1</sup> (fig.150). This painting takes as its subject a popular, but largely apocryphal, glimpse into the domestic life of the central characters of the Christian narrative, the Virgin with Joseph her spouse and the child Jesus. Here the Virgin is given prominence in her role as mother and Rembrandt concentrates on the intimate relationship between that mother and her son.

The *Holy Family* was just one of a number of representations of this subject Rembrandt made around this time. Some etchings and drawings have already been noted, but this was a major work. According to Tümpel, the size and subject of this *Holy Family* point to Rembrandt's wider aspirations. With the scale of this painting, 183.5 x 123.5 cm (the picture was originally slightly larger, it has been both trimmed and extended), Rembrandt hoped to offer large-sized history paintings, with their reference to contemporary and Renaissance artists, to the newly-rich Dutch patricians or to international high nobility.<sup>2</sup> He may even have intended it as an altar-piece. There was, states Tümpel, a certain envy among Northern artists at this time over the large altarpieces that artists in Italy and Flanders were asked to produce. Rembrandt had little competition as a history painter within his own city. He had surpassed his teacher Pieter Lastman and, after only two years in Amsterdam, other artists were imitating his style, above all his chiaroscuro.<sup>3</sup> Rembrandt's paintings up until the mid 1630s had been limited to small history pieces, but he was aware of the scale on which others were working and he too was beginning to experiment with larger canvases.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Until the 1960s the date was given as 1631; however extensive analysis of Rembrandt's working style, his signature and his use of colour, has led experts to suggest a date between 1633 and 1635 with an intermediate date of 1634 being accepted. See *Corpus*, Vol. II, 456.

<sup>2</sup> Tümpel, *Rembrandt, Images and Metaphors*, 118-119.

The *Corpus* states that although the canvas has been altered in size, a study of the cusping of the fabric shows that, although there have been several alterations (narrow edges have been added to right left, top and bottom), not a lot has been lost from the original size. The size of the canvas is now 183.5 x 123.5 cm. See *Corpus*, Vol. II, 452.

<sup>3</sup> Tümpel, *Images and Metaphors*, 118.

<sup>4</sup> Rembrandt painted several larger works around this time including *Flora* (1635, 123.5 x 97.5 cm), *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (1635, 193 x 133 cm) and *Belshazzar's Feast* (c.1635, 65 4/4 x 79 1/8 in). In

If Rembrandt was looking to an international market, the subject of this work might have been chosen because it would appear acceptable to both Catholic and Protestant patrons. While large-scale religious works had been rejected by a Calvinist hierarchy, this apparently ‘Catholic’ subject would have been viewed as a ‘history painting’, since it referenced biblical truths and demonstrated values important to a Reformed society. Even within that society the mother of Christ and the guarantor of his humanity could not be totally abandoned.<sup>5</sup> The Virgin remained as an historical figure, even if she had been stripped of her divine power. As a woman she was to become the model for all Christians, confined to the characteristically humble and domestic role of house mother.<sup>6</sup>

Superficially this painting appears to be a typical Holy Family richly observed. The scene takes place in the corner of a carpenter’s workshop with its broad-boarded floor, the stone wall behind hung with the tools of Joseph’s trade. The Virgin sits low to the ground with the child on her lap and gazes with wonder at the perfection of his two tiny feet, which she holds in her right hand. She has just finished feeding and the child is asleep. Joseph leans forward, visually distanced to the role of an observer in this informal scene. The focus lies almost exclusively on the maternal relationship of mother to son. Rembrandt bathes the breasts of the Virgin and the face of her sleeping child with light – emphasizing the humanity of the God-child manifested with particular intimacy in the primal act of breast-feeding.

Rembrandt’s emphasis on maternal intimacies and domestic detail echoed human experience and made this work one that could be seen as an example of a happy family life. Dutch art of the time celebrated the well-ordering of the family home, of maternal nursing and domesticated fathers.<sup>7</sup> As an expression of family love, mothers were often shown suckling their babies. Schama, in a broad and not entirely accurate observation, notes that as the Dutch abolished images of the Madonna and Child, they reintroduced them surreptitiously as simple nursing mothers.<sup>8</sup> To a certain extent

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1637 Rembrandt acquired a large history painting of a mythical scene *Hero and Leander* (c.1605) by Rubens. See *Rembrandt Documents*, 130-149, 144-145.

<sup>5</sup> Bridget Heal, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 282.

<sup>6</sup> Heal, 282.

<sup>7</sup> Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches*, 391, 403, 540.

<sup>8</sup> Schama uses as an example a painting by Gerard Houckgeest *The St. Jacob’s Church, The Hague* (1651) formerly in the Kunstmuseum, Dusseldorf and now lost, which shows the interior of the church with a woman sitting in the foreground breast-feeding her baby as her husband and child look on (Schama, 540).

Rembrandt complied with such expectations. His three major paintings on this theme: *Holy Family* (c.1633-35, Munich), *Holy Family* (1640, Louvre) and *Holy Family* (1646, Kassel) all suggest a humble yet comfortable existence and appear to be in tune with Protestant sensibilities. According to Trewin Copplestone, Rembrandt's approach to this subject stressed the human. He emphasises the role of Mary as the mother of the infant Jesus rather than identifying her as the Mother of God.<sup>9</sup>

Yet the Virgin Mary was always more than a normal mother. Early attempts to show her importance in theological terms inspired a range of possibilities made in response to or in anticipation of an evolving appreciation of her place within the structure of the Church. Throughout history representations showed her in a magisterial role, as Theotokos (the God bearer), her form and that of her son restricted to formulaic poses recognised by the faithful for the mysteries they represented. At the same time artists tried increasingly to represent her in human terms, to tie her life into the patterns of their own. So alive was she in the hearts of the faithful, says Bridget Heal, that, by the end of the fifteenth century, artistic attention had begun to shift from the place of the Virgin in the theology of the Church to more human considerations – to images that depicted Mary as a tender human mother caring for her infant son.<sup>10</sup> Such was the popularity of domestically-situated works that Miri Rubin believes they formed the genesis of genre painting.<sup>11</sup> These visualisations could be seen to validate the maternal experiences of women but, as Heal points out, while they did supply comforting, if elevated, role models, they were never straightforward expressions of human reality because they were never devoid of religious symbolism.<sup>12</sup>

Rembrandt's *Holy Family* was not simply a religious interpretation of a common secular genre subject. Despite the domesticity of the scene, Rembrandt chose to represent the Virgin in this work in a particular way. He was consciously adopting a motif in Marian art known as the *Maria Lactans* (Madonna of the Milk). The added emphasis that Rembrandt gives to the Virgin in her role as nursing mother ties this painting iconographically to a specific understanding of her importance in the life and devotion of the Catholic Church which throws into doubt its acceptability within a Protestant milieu.

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<sup>9</sup> Trewin Copplestone, *Understanding Rembrandt* (London:Trewin Copplestone Publishing, 1977): 23.

<sup>10</sup> Heal, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary*, 32.

<sup>11</sup> Miri Rubin, *Mother of God, A History of the Virgin Mary*, 358.

<sup>12</sup> Heal, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary*, 265-266.

## A history of the image

The biblical text is spare in the details it reveals about the domestic circumstances of the Holy Family. Luke's Gospel gives the most complete picture. He tells the story of the birth of Christ and of some of the circumstances surrounding his conception: the Annunciation to the Virgin, Joseph's taking Mary as his wife, the subsequent birth, Circumcision, Presentation in the Temple and the Flight into Egypt. The visual substance of these stories centres mainly on the person of the Virgin Mary. One short passage tells of the unseen life of Jesus at Nazareth. It says, he "grew to maturity ... he was filled with wisdom; and God's favour was with him" (Luke 2:40). One 'transgression' is reported, when, at the age of twelve, Jesus "stayed behind in Jerusalem" after the feast of the Passover, "without his parents knowing it" (Luke 2:43).

Except for a brief reference to his role in the nativity narratives of Matthew and Luke, almost nothing is learnt about Joseph, the husband of Mary and the earthly 'father' of Jesus. Only one further detail about his life is given: that he was a carpenter.<sup>13</sup> Matthew's Gospel narrates the story of Christ teaching in the Temple and of the astonishment and curiosity of his listeners who exclaim: "This is the carpenter's son surely? Is not his mother the woman called Mary...?" (Matthew 13:54). Into this void is poured a wealth of apocryphal text and artistic imagination.

The artistic imagination has never been as thoroughly exercised as it has been with representations of the 'Holy Family', a broad division of Marian art which covers images as simple as those which include only Mary and the child Jesus to more expansive versions, which include Joseph, or Anna, Mary's mother. Such representations may include also Jesus' infant cousin, John the Baptist, either on his own or with his mother, Elizabeth. Many domestic eventualities are covered. These images were often not based on a particular biblical text, but developed from narratives found in the apocryphal Gospels, notably the *Protevangelium of James* (second century), and the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (second century) which sought to give vitality and substance to the biblical texts. Some of these stories were later

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<sup>13</sup> Joseph's occupation as a carpenter and further detail about his life is found in the apocryphal gospel, the 'Infancy Gospel of James'. It is from this source that much of the visual inspiration for Joseph's life is obtained. See Robert J. Miller, ed. *The Complete Gospels* (San Francisco: Poloridge Press, 1992): 383-396.



incorporated into Jacobus de Voragine's *The Golden Legend* (c.1260) and have been widely disseminated through the visual arts.<sup>14</sup>

Marina Warner describes the long history of representations of the *Maria Lactans*. She points out that, from the earliest Marian images, the Mother of God has been represented feeding her child.<sup>15</sup> The first known image of the Madonna and Child, dating from the second century, is found in the Catacomb of St. Priscilla in Rome (fig.151). It shows the Virgin with the child Jesus at her breast and a prophet in attendance.<sup>16</sup> Maurice Vloberg notes further early representations of Mary as a nursing mother which date back to an Egyptian tombstone from the fifth century. This he suggests, provides evidence that this was already a theme in early Coptic art. He points to similar examples from sixth-century Egypt where they are found in the monastery of Baouit.<sup>17</sup> However, the theme of Mary suckling her child had an even more ancient counterpart. In Egypt, the goddess Isis is portrayed suckling the infant Horus (fig.152). The Romans connected milk with eternity and the greatness of the heavens.<sup>18</sup> According to legend, one night as she was feeding Hercules, Juno's milk sprayed across the sky creating our galaxy, the Milky Way.<sup>19</sup> Rubens painted this scene when he made his *Origins of the Milky Way* (1636) (fig.153).

Artists from every age illustrated the Virgin with the child at her breast with various degrees of emotional extravagance and anatomical correctness. Pietro Lorenzetti (active 1320-45) in his *Maria Lactans* (c.1330), shows, in what may be a matter of style rather than ignorance of the female anatomy, a tender Virgin suckling from a breast placed high beside her shoulder (fig.154). By the 1500s, Jan Gossaert had made the bare breast in his *Virgin and Child* (1527) (fig.155) a feature in itself, for the breast is exposed but the child appears to take little interest in it. Closer to

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<sup>14</sup> For instance, the presence of an ox and an ass at the birth of Christ is not recorded in the biblical text but is found in *The Golden Legend*. Three Kings are also noted in *The Golden Legend* where the biblical text speaks only of 'some wise men' (Mat. 2: 1-2). For the story of the Nativity, see de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, Vol. I: 37-43. For the visit of the Magi see pages 78-84.

<sup>15</sup> Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 192.

<sup>16</sup> There is however some discussion about the identity of the group. The Virgin is described as clothed in a stole and short veil in an attitude of meditation. On her knee she holds her naked son whose head is turned "as if someone has called him" - whether he has been disturbed while breast-feeding is not apparent. The prophet, holding the scroll of the scriptures in his left hand and pointing towards the Virgin with his right is variously described as Balaam who foretold the coming of a star out of Jacob, or as Isaiah who foretold the virgin birth of Christ. See Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church, The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*, 84.

<sup>17</sup> Maurice Vloberg, "Iconic Types of the Virgin in Western Art", in Sarah Jane Boss, ed. *Mary, The Complete Resource*, (London: Continuum, 2007): 556.

<sup>18</sup> Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 196.

<sup>19</sup> Warner, 196.

Rembrandt's own artistic tradition was the work of Albrecht Dürer, who made a series of eleven works on the Holy Family and the Saints. Two graphic works, *Madonna on a Grassy Bench* (1503) (fig.156) and *Madonna Nursing* (1519) (fig.157), were specifically *Maria Lactans* and copies may well have been works with which Rembrandt was familiar and was later to own. They might even have suggested the subject to him.

## Doctrinal issues

The extraordinary intimacy of a mother feeding her child with sustenance produced from within her own body was embraced by Old Testament writers to explain the relationship between God and man. The prophet Isaiah uses the image of a child sucking at the breast to describe the new nation to which Jerusalem would give birth: "That you may be suckled, filled, from her consoling breast, that you may savour with delight her glorious breasts" (Isaiah 66: 11) and even more aptly for this subject: "At her breast will her nurslings be carried and fondled in her lap. Like a son comforted by his mother will I comfort you" (Isaiah 66: 12-13). Milk and honey became the metaphor for the Promised Land: "Your lips, my promised one distil wild honey, Honey and milk are under your tongue" (Song of Songs 4:11).<sup>20</sup> But more importantly in this context is the New Testament sanction where Mary is praised for her role as the woman who fed the infant Christ.

One of the most frequently used verses from Catholic sixteenth-century sermons, according to Donna Spivey Ellington, was the *Beatus Venter* which is found in the Gospel story of Luke.<sup>21</sup> The story is told that while Christ was "in a certain place" both praying and teaching, "a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said, 'Happy the womb that bore you and the breasts you sucked.'" But Christ replied: "Still happier those who hear the word of God and keep it" (Luke 11:27-28). Preachers preferred to dwell on the woman's praise of Mary rather than Christ's admonition to the woman.<sup>22</sup> For the Christian, says Warner, "the mystery of the incarnate God was concentrated with unique intensity in the symbol of Mary's milk."<sup>23</sup> Milk was at the same time an ancient and symbolic language, a symbol of Christ's humanity, and the

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<sup>20</sup> This imagery is used to describe the mutual love of Christ for his church or the union of the individual soul with God.

<sup>21</sup> Ellington, *From Sacred Body to Angelic Soul*, 173.

<sup>22</sup> Ellington, 173. See also Knipping, *Iconography of the Counter Reformation in the Netherlands*, 263.

<sup>23</sup> Warner, *Alone of all her Sex*, 193.

crucial metaphor for the gift of life since, without it, the child had little chance of survival; its fortuitous appearance after birth was as much a providential mystery as birth itself.<sup>24</sup>

Mariology focussed in a particular way on Mary suckling her child. Her bared breast referred also to a pictorial convention of a type known as the *Madonna Avocata*, which invokes the Virgin's intercession for the salvation of the human soul.<sup>25</sup> Well into the seventeenth century the virginal breast signified the "Madonna's mercy" in her context as the "nourisher of the saviour" and the compassionate advocate for all sinners.<sup>26</sup> In his study of the Virgin as Madonna of Humility, Millard Meiss notes that representations of the Virgin sitting low to the ground and nursing her baby are of particular significance. The act of nursing signifies moral qualities of benevolence, mercy and charity. It shows the relationship between the mother and her son and the power that arose from that motherhood in her role as the compassionate, maternal intercessor for humanity before "the impartial justice of Christ or God the father."<sup>27</sup>

That singular power of a mother over her son was also noted by the seventeenth-century Jesuit writer Peregrinus Amstelius (1646). In his efforts to refute the objections of his Protestant contemporaries against Mary's power of intercession, he quoted the *Iliad*, which speaks of the unveiling of the breast in order to remind and convince an unwilling son or daughter of their duty.<sup>28</sup> The Virgin's breast was, from medieval times, compared in art and literature to the spear wound in Christ's side. As Mary gave Christ his human form, signified by her breast, so was Christ able to die for the salvation of the world signified by the wound in his side.<sup>29</sup> Bound by filial obedience Christ could refuse her nothing. The link between Mary's maternity and her intercessory power is established in what became known as 'the double intercession', where Christ and Mary are shown presenting themselves to the Father, Christ showing his wounds and Mary showing her breast. A Hans Holbein the Elder painting made for the Augsburgers Ulrich Schwartz (1508) shows Christ baring his wounds as Mary

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<sup>24</sup> Warner, 194.

<sup>25</sup> Pamela Askew, *Caravaggio's Death of the Virgin*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990): 75.

<sup>26</sup> Askew, 76.

<sup>27</sup> Millard Meiss, "The Madonna of Humility" *The Art Bulletin* 18.4 (1936): 460.

<sup>28</sup> Peregrinus Amstelius (1587-1665), *Extractum Catholicum* (1646) (quoted in Knipping, 263). The original quote used by Amstelius comes from the *Iliad*, Book 22, 880-885. See Homer, *Iliad*, trans. Richard Latimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951): 437.

<sup>29</sup> Boss, *Mary: The Complete Resource*, 388.

bare her breast. An explanatory text above Christ reads “Father, see my red wounds, help men in their need through my bitter death.” The words above Mary read “Lord, sheath your sword that you have drawn and see my breast which your son has sucked.”<sup>30</sup> John Knipping identifies a variation on this theme as the “double plea” where Christ is shown carrying his cross and indicating the wound to his side as Mary exposes her breast, each pointing to their own claim to obtain mercy before God the Father for the human race.<sup>31</sup> This was a common motif in medieval iconography (fig.158), but it was also present in Rembrandt’s own time. A particularly effusive rendering of this motif is found in Abraham Bloemaert’s (1566-1651) altarpiece for the Cathedral of St. John in Hertogenbosch, *The Virgin Mary and Christ as Intercessors before God the Father* (1615) (fig.159). Engraved prints of this same theme were readily available. For example, Jerome Wierix’s (1553-1619) *Salve Regina* showed scenes from the Virgin’s life set around a picture of Christ with his cross and Mary exposing her breast to God the Father.

Mary’s motherhood embraced further symbolism. Timothy Verdon notes a theme that tied Mary to the sacrament of the Eucharist. Her maternal role as nourisher of the Christ child became likened to Christ’s gift of his body and blood in the Eucharist; a fifteenth-century fresco of the Virgin feeding her child, for instance, found in the grotto at Grecia, Rieti, is situated directly above the altar where the priest consecrates the bread and wine in the Mass. As Mary feeds her son, so the son nourishes the faithful through the Eucharist.<sup>32</sup> The importance of the broader theological possibilities of this subject appear to have been taken into account by Rembrandt, for he, as few artists did, illustrates not only the breast but the life-giving nourishment itself in the form of a single translucent drop which hangs from the Virgin’s nipple (fig.160).

## The iconography

The earliest depiction Rembrandt made of the subject of the Holy Family is found in an etching, *The Holy Family* c.1632 (fig.161). It is a quiet domestic scene. Mary sits on a low step, the baby at her breast. Rembrandt’s powers of observation are acute. The child has fallen asleep but the Virgin appears not to have noticed. Beside her is a

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<sup>30</sup> Heal, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary*, 269.

<sup>31</sup> See Knipping, *Heaven on Earth*, 264-266.

<sup>32</sup> Timothy Verdon, *Mary in Western Art* (New York and Manchester: Hudson Hills Press, 2005): 61.

wicker basket containing folded napkins. Behind to the right, propped against the wall, is a wicker *bakermat*, over which is draped a shawl.<sup>33</sup> Joseph, in profile, sits in the background reading. The play of light coming from an intimation of a window on the left wall falls on the Virgin and her child. Attention is drawn to the contemplative face of Mary. She appears both meditative and distracted. Her slipper has fallen to the floor, a motif repeated in the drawing of the *Annunciation* (c.1635). That she has finished feeding the baby is obvious; Rembrandt has gauged so beautifully the weight and fall of an empty breast.

According to Arthur Hind, the first state of this etching shows a lightly-etched arch visible in the background. There is some uncertainty about the presence of an arch since the etching is fine and lightly inked.<sup>34</sup> If an arch is present in an earlier state as Hind suggests, it would provide a visual link with Rembrandt's painting of the same subject. The relationship of this small etching to the painting is a matter for debate. It is complicated by the difficulty in dating works. White dates the etching of *The Holy Family* at 1631 and suggests that the painting had been made the year before.<sup>35</sup> Williams points out that, originally, it was thought that the etching had been made after the painting but those views have now been discounted.<sup>36</sup> The proximity of both works does suggest, however, that the etching may have been a preliminary working-out of an idea for the painted work.

Whether the etching was a preliminary idea for the painting or not, it carries a different emotion to that of the later work – there is a sense of unease about the etching whereas the painting records a scene of domestic contentment. The suggestion of an arch in the etching is carried forward into an obvious masonry architectural detail in the background of the painting which frames the Virgin and child. It initiates a circular compositional element which is carried through the curved placement of the Virgin, around and through the leaning figure of Joseph to enclose the scene with the sleeping child at its heart. There is a sense here that the Virgin herself forms a

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<sup>33</sup> The *bakermat* was a legless wicker couch used by mothers in seventeenth-century Holland when feeding their babies. Clifford S. Ackley, ed. *Rembrandt's Journey: Painter Draftsman, Etcher* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts Catalogue, 2004): 124. Here the *bakermat* is not in use but is propped against the wall behind. The Virgin sits on a low step, perhaps an added motif to signal her humility.

<sup>34</sup> Although noting the presence of an arch Hind suggests that this might be just a matter of the impression. It is not present in any of the prints I have viewed. See Hind, *A Catalogue of Rembrandt Etchings*, 66.

<sup>35</sup> White, *Rembrandt as an Etcher*, 32. White identifies this particular painting by describing the Virgin as “holding the child away from her breast” and glancing at him out of the corner of her eyes while Joseph “eagerly strains forward to catch a glimpse of the child on his wife’s lap”.

<sup>36</sup> Williams, *Rembrandt's Women*, 83.

mandorla around the child further suggesting his divine nature. The background is filled by a row of carpenter's tools, which hang from a strap on the wall behind.

Representations of the Holy Family situated in a domestic space were part of Rembrandt's Netherlandish heritage. Robert Campin (c.1375-1444) (fig.162), in particular, shows in meticulous detail an interior where Mary sits on a wooden bench feeding her baby. There is a circular flax screen behind her head which appears as a halo, in effect sanctifying a simple domestic scene. A book of prayer lies open on the cushion beside her. Subjects such as these, where Mary is placed within a domestic setting, says Bridget Heal, had the advantage of being easy to assimilate into a later Lutheran culture. At a superficial level they could be re-interpreted "in accordance with the evangelical understanding of Mary as *Hausmutter* or huisvrouw (housewife) rather than divine intercessor."<sup>37</sup>

Heal uses as an example an etching by Bartel Behan (1502-1540) where Mary is shown as a prosperous housewife nursing her child in a window-seat (fig.163). This could have been a depiction of any mother and child "were it not for the vase of lilies and the glass flask which indicated her purity."<sup>38</sup> So popular were such prints within a Lutheran setting that an Albrecht Altdorfer (1480-1538) *Holy Family* woodcut (c.1520) (fig.164), a picture of Anna and the Virgin putting the Christ child to bed, with a suitable explanatory text added by Philip Melanchthon (a colleague of Martin Luther) inscribed beneath, was reissued three times.<sup>39</sup>

Rembrandt, however, takes this work beyond a simple recognition of Mary as a housewife. The Virgin sits low at an angle, her ankles crossed in front of her, her feet hidden except for the toe of a peasant-like shoe which protrudes from under the hem of her heavy red gown. The sleeve on her right arm is rolled up, revealing a brownish lining and a white under-shirt. On her lap the child lies asleep on a fur-lined blanket. She has finished feeding the child but her left breast remains uncovered. Beside her the wicker cradle lies with its bedding folded back, the dents from the baby's body still warmly impressed. Joseph leans forward with his elbow resting on the top of the cradle while the other hand rests on a covered shape, probably a chest of some type, beside him.

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<sup>37</sup> Heal, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary*, 94.

<sup>38</sup> Heal, 98.

<sup>39</sup> Heal, 94.

The Virgin looks remarkably content. Her right hand holds the feet of her child in a gesture so familiar to a mother who marvels constantly at the innocent perfection of tiny fingers and toes. Williams, in noting the position of the Virgin's hand cradling the feet of the child, suggests that this motif is derived from images of sixteenth-century Venetian art, in turn originating from Byzantine *Hypsolitera* icons.<sup>40</sup> She suggests also that the section cut from the left side of the painting may have contained a fire, a motif which features in Rembrandt's later paintings of the Holy Family.<sup>41</sup> In that case, Mary could be seen to be warming her baby's feet but there appears to be little to substantiate this observation. Rembrandt indicates no source of light to the lower left: there are no shadows, no flickering indications or glow which might suggest anything other than the single source of light which appears to come from higher up.

The Virgin's hair is unrestrained and covered by a meticulously indicated lace veil which covers part of her forehead and falls over her right shoulder. The deeply-laced bodice of her rust-red dress has been loosened to allow the child access to her breast. A fine linen covering, tied at the neck and open down the centre has been pulled aside to the left to expose the breast, while the right side remains tucked into the front of her bodice. The child lies on her lap, asleep and satiated, his forehead just settled against the warmth of her exposed breast. He is dressed in a brown top covered with a white napkin and swaddled in a green blanket and he lies on a meticulously articulated fur-lined wrap. This detail may be a deliberate reference to Christ's cousin, John the Baptist, since representations of the Holy Family commonly included both Joseph and Mary with the Christ Child and Joachim and Anna with John the Baptist.<sup>42</sup> The motif of fur associated with John the Baptist was common in Renaissance and Baroque art. Raphael used it in his *John the Baptist* (1516, Paris: Louvre) as did Caravaggio in his *John the Baptist* (c.1600, Rome, Capitoline Museum). It comes from a Bible passage where Matthew describes the Saint: "This man John wore a garment made of camel

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<sup>40</sup> Williams, *Rembrandt's Women*, 102. This suggestion has been made much earlier by Josiah Bruyn in his paper "Rembrandt and the Italian Baroque", *Simiolus* 4:1 (1970): 35. For further information on the *hypsolitera* motif in Marian art, see Ann Markhan Schultz, *Gianmaria Mosca Called Padovano: A Renaissance Sculptor in Italy and Poland* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 1998); Heinrich Eduard Brockhaus, *Die Kunst in den Athos-Klöstern* (Chestnut Hill: Elibron Classics, 2005).

<sup>41</sup> Williams, 102.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Raphael's *Carnigiani Holy Family* (1507-8) (Alte Pinakothek, Munich) and his *Holy Family of Francis I* (1518), (Louvre).

hair with a leather belt around his waist (Matthew 3:4). Rembrandt also suggests the belt in the double-tied girdle around the blanket.

Joseph's placement, in particular within this work, is of interest. It is the only time that Rembrandt portrays him actively and intimately engaged with the Virgin and child. On the other occasions he interprets this subject, Joseph is portrayed in the background reading, as in his etching *The Holy Family* (1631), or working at his carpenter's bench (*Holy Family with St. Anne* 1640) (fig.165) and *Holy Family with Angels* (1645) (fig.166) and several sketches of the same subject. In the later etching *Virgin with Cat and Snake* (1654) Joseph is placed outside looking through a window. In these examples he is separated spatially and iconographically from the important scene of mother-love. Even here, in Rembrandt's *The Holy Family*, despite its seeming intimacy, Joseph is subtly excluded.

Joseph's presence seems almost a metaphor for separation, for he touches neither the child nor the child's mother but leans on the empty crib. He appears to be looking down at the child but a closer examination of the direction of his gaze suggests that the focus is not on the baby but on the breast of his mother. Rembrandt paints Joseph as an active, virile man separated not only from the Virgin, his wife, by her virginity and the enforced celibacy that implies for his own life, but by the fact that he is not in any sense other than vocationally, the father of his 'son'.<sup>43</sup> It is a double dilemma seldom referred to in biblical commentary. Rembrandt strengthens the separation in even more subtle ways through his use of light. The source of light appears to come from the high left of the picture and floods the scene with an intimate intensity. It lights the side of the Virgin's face and forehead, her breasts and the child lying in her arms. It picks out only parts of the figure of Joseph: his upper face, his shoulders, part of his hand and his sober dress, a low-necked white undershirt worn beneath a plain brown tabard.

The light falls across Joseph's shoulders in a yoke-like pattern pre-figuring perhaps, the yoke that Rembrandt was later to show him making in his carpenter's workshop in his *Holy Family with Angels* (1645) where it references also the burden that Joseph himself would carry as putative father to his divine 'son'. Rembrandt, a reader of the Bible, would have known the verse from St Matthew's Gospel:

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<sup>43</sup> Catholic theology states that Mary remained a Virgin after she gave birth to Christ and therefore Joseph would have been expected to also live a life of celibacy. Both Luther and Calvin, despite their differing views on the status of Mary, accepted that Mary remained a Virgin. See Ellington, *From Sacred Body to Angelic Soul*, 155.



“Shoulder my yoke and learn from me for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Yes, my yoke is easy and my burden light” (Matthew. 11:28-30). He applies it visually to Joseph and he seems aware of a greater meaning. Many artists record Joseph working in his carpenter’s shop, but no one other than Rembrandt, as far as I can establish, shows him actually working on a wooden yoke as he does in the later work *The Holy Family with Angels*.<sup>44</sup>

This same bright light partially illuminates the wicker crib and its bedding. The empty crib with its stripped-back linen is an obvious allusion to Christ’s death, to the empty tomb and the winding cloth laid inside which announced his Resurrection to the women who came later to embalm his body.

All but hidden in the dark background, which frames Joseph, there is a curtain drawn to one side.<sup>45</sup> The curtain, as a motif in art, has long been associated with images of the Madonna. Annunciations, Coronations, Queenship and even that of *Maria Lactans* shown in the Coptic Relief, *Maria Lactans* (fig.167), have been ‘revealed’ through the use of the fictive curtain.<sup>46</sup> Johann Konrad Eberlein takes this research further and illustrates how the curtain motif was also associated with the figure of Joseph. In nativity scenes from the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the curtain was used to demonstrate Joseph’s exclusion from the scene. Sometimes Joseph is pushed to the side by one of the framing curtains as in a illustration of the Nativity by an unknown artist from Liège (fig.168), and at other times, as in Hugo van der Goes *Nativity* (c.1480) (fig.169), he sits to the front of the picture plane holding aside the curtain as if it is he himself who is revealing the scene to the viewer.<sup>47</sup> In the case of Rembrandt’s *Holy Family*, it appears to be a simple element forming part of the background which, drawn to one side, reveals both the tools of Joseph’s trade, and by inference, the elements of the passion. It could again refer to Joseph’s own revelation – a full enlightenment or understanding of what the birth of this child might actually mean to him.

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<sup>44</sup> Robert Baldwin writes of the importance of the yoke as a metaphor for conjugal love: the Latin word *conjugum* literally means “yoked together”. In patristic writings on the soul, the wife bears this husbandly yoke, along with the gentle yoke of God as Christ’s mystical bride. In this scene it is Joseph not Mary, his wife, who wears the yoke, Rembrandt seems to emphasize powerfully both the responsibility Joseph carries and the subordinate role he plays in the salvation narrative. See Robert Baldwin, “The Touch of Love: Gestures of Touch in Three late Works of Rembrandt”, *Midwest Art History Society*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan (27 March 1987): 3.

<sup>45</sup> This is described as a “large dark curtain hanging down behind the piece of furniture”: 450. See *Corpus*, Vol. II, 452.

<sup>46</sup> Eberlein, “The Curtain in Raphael’s Sistine Madonna”, *Art Bulletin* 65.1 (1983): 70.

<sup>47</sup> Eberlein, 68-69.

The curtain motif is repeated in the way the linen covering has been pulled aside to reveal the Virgin's breast. Here is one of the most potent images of maternity: Rembrandt makes obvious the change which takes place within a woman's body after parturition. The breast-curtain reveals Mary's motherhood by exposing the copious breasts of a lactating mother. Rembrandt does not identify the Virgin by any of the motifs particular to her role as a virgin mother: there are no lilies, no salvers, no clear glass pitchers, no prayer books – it is her human role that he indicates. It is, in this instance, Joseph and the tools of *his* trade as a carpenter which identify in iconic detail the messianic subject of this painting, but the placement of the Virgin with her child can also be seen to prefigure the death of Christ – the position of the Christ Child lying on the Virgin's lap will later become that of the Pietà.

The semi-darkness that surrounds the group disguises further allusions to the future. The *Corpus* describes the tools hanging from a leather strap attached horizontally to the wall as, from left to right, a chisel, a brace, a wooden mallet, a drawing knife with two handles and a bag, all tools related to the construction of a wooden structure and, in these circumstances, to a cross. There is a hank of twine hanging above the drawing knife, symbolic of the ties used to bind Christ's hands and draw him to his crucifixion. While bindings are not specifically mentioned in the biblical text, their presence is made implicit in the words found in each of the Gospels “and they led him away to crucify him” (Matthew 27: 31).<sup>48</sup> Scarcely seen in the background behind the Virgin is a work bench on which a hammer lies.

At the lower left of the picture a branch of wood lying on the floor is an allusion, according to Schama, to the crucifixion.<sup>49</sup> Perlove and Silver recognise this dimly-lit group of objects as: a large book, a Bible, resting on a pair of logs which “evokes Jesus as the promised Messiah of the Old Testament.” The presence of a book is not borne out in the findings of the *Corpus* analysis.<sup>50</sup> If it is present, it is difficult to distinguish. The branch on the floor could have further significance indicating Christ's birth as a fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy. Isaiah 11:1 prefigures the coming of Christ by identifying him as a branch from the tree of life: “A shoot springs from the root of Jesse, a scion thrusts from his roots.”

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<sup>48</sup> *Corpus*, Vol. II, 450.

<sup>49</sup> Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes*, 439.

<sup>50</sup> Perlove and Silver, *Rembrandt's Faith*, 176-177.

There is another motif present in this dark lower left-hand corner which is seldom recognised but which is described in the *Corpus* analysis.<sup>51</sup> There is an earthenware pot with a handle, which can be distinguished on the floor beside the branch of wood (fig.170). This appears to be an allusion to another New Testament story. The jug of water is the central motif in a biblical narrative which Rembrandt was to illustrate several times. The story of the Woman of Samaria whom Christ approached as she drew water from the well is a story of physical need and spiritual recognition. When Christ asks the woman at the well for a drink, she is surprised that he would speak to her since he was a Jew and she a Samaritan. Christ promised her “Whoever drinks the water I shall give will never be thirsty again: the water I give will turn into a spring inside him welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14). Rembrandt’s etching *Christ and the Woman of Samaria among the Ruins* (fig.171) was made in 1634, around the same time this picture was being painted.<sup>52</sup> It makes sense to read this motif in conjunction with that of the Virgin feeding her child. Mary’s role as nourisher of the infant Christ finds its fulfilment in Christ’s later promise to the woman at the well, the promise of ‘living water’, a metaphor for eternal life. It recalls also the apocryphal story of the Annunciation which the *Protevangelium of James* describes as taking place as Mary draws water from the well.

Behind the Virgin and to the left of the picture Rembrandt deepens the sense of premonition. Strange shadows on the wall suggest a part of the scene that is not directly visible to the viewer. There appears to be the shadow of a person holding a long knife-like object which could imply a subtle reference to the prophecy of Simeon made in the Temple when Mary was warned that “a sword shall pierce your own soul” (Luke 2:35).<sup>53</sup>

Even the observed ‘naturalness’ of the Virgin herself is fraught. Her face bears an idealised resemblance to the face of Saskia who became Rembrandt’s wife around the time this painting was made. Such similarities have been noted in other works from this period, including *Bust of a Young Woman* (1633) and *Bellona* (1633) and the two paintings of *Flora* made in 1634 and 1635.<sup>54</sup> Rembrandt was engaged to Saskia in

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<sup>51</sup> *Corpus*, Vol. II, 452.

<sup>52</sup> Image source: Schwarz, *The Complete Etchings of Rembrandt*, B71.

<sup>53</sup> The *Corpus*, Vol. II, 452, states that these shadows remain unexplained.

<sup>54</sup> Image source: *Bust of a Young Woman* (Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden) (1633): [http://www.rembrandtpainting.net/rmbrndt\\_1620-35/bust\\_of\\_young\\_woman\\_smiling.htm](http://www.rembrandtpainting.net/rmbrndt_1620-35/bust_of_young_woman_smiling.htm); *Bellona* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art): Williams, *Rembrandt’s Women*, 101. *Flora* (1634) (St. Petersburg: Hermitage): Williams, *Rembrandt’s Women*, 105;

1633 and was not to become her husband until 16 June, 1634, but his images of women had already absorbed the likeness of his wife-to-be.<sup>55</sup>

Although the scene of a breast-feeding woman was obviously closely observed from life, it must be wondered from where such observation was made, since Rembrandt's first child was not born until 1635. Rembrandt, as the ninth of ten children, could hardly be expected to remember scenes of his mother breast-feeding his final sibling.<sup>56</sup> Yet his observations are extraordinary. The sleeping child lying satiated in his mother's arms has just been feeding. The pink pressure on his nose from its depression against his mother's breast is still obvious. The baby lies against what Williams describes as "Mary's engorged breast, from which milk leaks in welling bright drops of paint".<sup>57</sup> This could, of course, suggest that this painting was made after the birth of Rembrandt's first-born.

This idea can be supported by the chronological context of the painting. Rembrandt's interest in the naked female form at this stage in his life is well-documented. His preparatory drawing for *Diana at her Bath* (c.1631-33) and the subsequent etching of the same scene were made in c.1631-33 (fig.172). So too was his famous etching of *Naked Woman Sitting on a Mound* (1631) (fig.173) where a woman is shown with her dumpling breasts, sagging stomach and garter marks on her calves. The timeframe coincides also with a bawdy and suggestive drawing of *The Prodigal Son with a Whore* (1630s) (fig.174), a preparatory sketch, it is said, for his *Self-Portrait with Saskia as the Prodigal Son with a Whore* (c.1635) (fig.175). Schama points out that this extreme naturalism, so different from the "cool Italian style", indicated not ugliness but desirability. Rembrandt, "alone among the Baroque artists" was, according to Schama, "irresistibly drawn to explore ... the quasi-nude, the imperfect conversion process by which live models were made over into mythological or biblical figures."<sup>58</sup> It could be suggested that the figure of the Virgin Mary in Rembrandt's *Holy Family* (1633-5) fits within Schama's model, for here the quasi-nude has taken on a biblical role.<sup>59</sup> The "extreme naturalism" of the Virgin makes her at the same time a desirable woman, a representation of his wife and the

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Flora (1635) (London: National Gallery): Williams, *Rembrandt's Women*, 116.

<sup>55</sup> Williams, *Rembrandt's Women*, 98, 100, 110.

<sup>56</sup> Field, *Rembrandt*, 55.

<sup>57</sup> Williams, *Rembrandt's Women*, 102.

<sup>58</sup> Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes*, 393.

<sup>59</sup> Schama, 393.

holiest of all women. The Virgin, in all her naturalness, both redeems and glorifies the female body.

## Seeking a source

The attraction of this particular subject to the young Rembrandt, could be found in the events of his own life, but there are many precedents for such a work within the artistic tradition. Joos Bruyn, in his study of Rembrandt's debt to the Italian Baroque, sees this painting as the best example of Rembrandt's "leaning towards an early Baroque style."<sup>60</sup> He interprets the two main actors as "describing a spatial pattern that consists of two diagonal curves which cross one another at right angles." He recognises also, something of Parmigianino's mannerist *linea serpentinata*.<sup>61</sup> Within the Dutch context of the 1630s, says Bruyn, this work was an impressive example of light and shade, colour, tonal variation and spatial organisation which made this work an "important and daring achievement."<sup>62</sup>

Also seeking artistic precursors, Williams views this painting as related stylistically to Rubens and to Van Dyck (1599-1641) with its "smooth plasticity" of draped fabric.<sup>63</sup> It demonstrates, she says, Rembrandt's growing interest in Baroque and in particular Flemish art.<sup>64</sup> Rubens' depiction of the *Holy Family* (c.1616) (fig.176) has been cited as an influence and possible model. There is something of Rubens' sweet-faced Madonna, of Joseph's form as he leans forward to see the child and of the cane basket in which the child plays with his cousin, in Rembrandt's painting. These could suggest that he was aware of Rubens' work.

Although a similarity in style and the way Rembrandt used his paint may provide a common thread in the works of these artists, Rubens' and Van Dyck's naked babies and romantic poses are 'studied'; they have little of the serenely contemplative and naturalistic qualities of Rembrandt's painting. Christopher White suggests that Rembrandt may have drawn on an etching by Annibale Carracci *Holy Family* (1590) (fig.177) for inspiration: both show Joseph in profile and both depict the Virgin sitting

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<sup>60</sup> Joos Bruyn, "Rembrandt and the Italian Baroque", *Simiolus* 4.1 (1970): 35. Bruyn limits Rembrandt's dependence on Renaissance models to the years up until 1636.

<sup>61</sup> Bruyn, 36.

<sup>62</sup> Bruyn, 36.

<sup>63</sup> Williams, *Rembrandt's Women*, 102. Seymour Slive also suggests the relationship between Rubens, Van Dyck and Rembrandt's painting of this work (Slive, *Dutch Painting 1600-1800*, 64-65).

<sup>64</sup> Williams, 102.

bent forward with her legs outstretched.<sup>65</sup> This etching, however appears to bear a much closer relationship to Rembrandt's earlier etching of the *Holy Family* (c.1632) than to the *Holy Family* (1633-35). The *Corpus*, which dates this work based on comparisons with other paintings made around this time, notes a Northern Italian influence. The arrangement of the figures and the position in which the baby is held is reminiscent, they claim, of Venetian art, although they are unable to find any direct quotation.<sup>66</sup>

I suggest that some of Rembrandt's influences may be found as easily in the work of Federico Barocci, copies of whose work were later to be found in Rembrandt's collection. Barocci's *Holy Family with Infant St. John and Cat* (c.1575) (fig.178) has some of the stylistic qualities found in Rembrandt's *Holy Family*: St Joseph leans forward to watch the baby momentarily separated from his mother's breast; her feet are extended and she sits on a low bench or step; there is also a wicker basket in the right foreground.

In some senses Rembrandt's approach to the imagery also owes something to Caravaggio. The deep spatial contrast between figure and form echo Caravaggio's ability to illuminate a scene then isolate it within deep shadow. The placement of Rembrandt's figures in the forefront of the picture gives them an immediacy which is reminiscent of Caravaggio's work. There is also some pictorial similarity. Caravaggio's *Death of the Virgin* (1609) (fig.179) shows the dead Virgin dressed in red the bodice of her gown un-laced allowing a glimpse of her breasts and so acknowledges her primary role as mother and nurturer of her son (fig.180). As with Caravaggio's Madonna, Rembrandt's Virgin recalls this same convention. Mary's bared breast, as has been noted, referred to a pictorial type known as the *Madonna Avocata*, the Virgin as mother who could intercede on behalf of humankind.

## A Reformed acceptability

Because the pedagogic potential of traditional Catholic imagery was recognised, Reformed adherents often added explanations based on a biblical text which provided legitimacy for their acceptance of seemingly Catholic subjects.<sup>67</sup> Kreitzer shows a clear development in the treatment of Mary in sermons of the late sixteenth century

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<sup>65</sup> Christopher White, *Rembrandt as an Etcher* (London: A. Zwemmer Ltd. 1969): 33.

<sup>66</sup> *Corpus*, Vol. II, 456.

<sup>67</sup> Heal, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary*, 94-96.

and a re-aligning of her position within Reformed belief. Protestant sermon writers were concerned to “remove the image of Mary from its Catholic constellation”, replacing the Queen of Heaven with a “pious and modest mother obedient under law and authority.”<sup>68</sup> Such sermons served the dual purpose of appropriating popular imagery and “insinuating an ecclesiastical critique of the Catholic Church.”<sup>69</sup> By the end of the sixteenth century, however, the emphasis had shifted for both Catholic and Protestant preachers alike. “Mary’s obedience to the word of God was her true glory, preferable even to her physical motherhood of Christ”; but this change took place for different reasons.<sup>70</sup> Protestant theologians, says Ellington, sought to undermine the theological basis for Mary’s place within the life of the Church. Defensively, Catholic sermons after the Reformation and the Council of Trent, began to present a “more individualised and distant figure than the woman whose image, relics and bodily participation” in all aspects of the life of Christ, had caused a Protestant reaction to her elevated place in Catholic piety.<sup>71</sup> Yet it was that familiarity and closeness which had made the Virgin seem so tangible in the context of fifteenth-century devotion.<sup>72</sup>

A reworking of extant religious images, especially those featuring the Virgin Mary, to conform to Reformed sensibilities played an important role in the Dutch Republic of Rembrandt’s time. Maternal references carried within them both a domestic and a religious virtue. Although the depiction of mothers with their babies had, in Dutch art, broken away to some extent from Catholic and Renaissance conventions, there still remained the remnant of an older order, an example which had both social and religious connotations.<sup>73</sup> Christ, visualised as an infant doing obviously baby things, was, as Schama puts it, “economically represented in the innocence of babyhood, announcing his commonality with mortal flesh but at the same time separated by his foreknowledge of his destiny as crucified Messiah.”<sup>74</sup>

Schama notes the dual purpose of such images moulded to the expectations of a society that placed great value on the mother and child in the home. When children feed at the breast, he says, “they do not stare with eschatologically-ordained

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<sup>68</sup> Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary*, 91.

<sup>69</sup> Kreitzer, 91.

<sup>70</sup> Heal, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary*, 174.

<sup>71</sup> The Council of Trent met in twenty-five sessions beginning in Trent on 13 December 1545 with a final session in Trent in 1563.

<sup>72</sup> Heal, 148.

<sup>73</sup> Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches*, 283.

<sup>74</sup> Schama, 4.

determination at the viewer in the manner of the Christ-child, but bury themselves deep in the bosom of their Dutch mothers.”<sup>75</sup> However, the Madonna-like implications were not lost. Breast-feeding itself was considered one of the main attributes of true mother-love.<sup>76</sup> The use of wet-nurses, except in the case of dire emergency or the death of the mother, was discouraged.<sup>77</sup> Breast-feeding then was, at the same time, a domestic need, a social responsibility and a quasi-religious experience. The Protestant poet Jacob Cats in his poem on the virtues of motherhood *Moeder*, published in 1642, writes:

Employ O young wife, your precious gift,  
Give the noble suck to refresh your little fruit  
There is nothing an upright man would rather see  
Than his dear wife bid the child to teat  
This bosom that you carry, so swollen up with life ...<sup>78</sup>

Martin Luther himself had something to say on the matter of nursing women. In his advice to women he says: “Their mother’s milk is children’s best nourishment ... just as young calves put on more weight from the milk they suck... It is unfriendly and unnatural for a mother not to nurse her child for God has given her breasts and milk for that purpose.”<sup>79</sup>

Despite the appealing link between portrayals of the Virgin as a breast-feeding mother and the contemporary norms of Dutch society, such images had, by Rembrandt’s time, largely gone out of fashion. Elite groups within both Catholic and Reformed societies were “becoming more insistent on bodily control and decorum in public places.”<sup>80</sup> In his treatise on sacred painting *De Pictura Sacra, Liber Primus, De Nuditate*, Federico Borromeo (1564-1631), Cardinal Archbishop of Milan and founder of the Ambrosiana, warned artists about the depiction of “the Infant Jesus suckling so that the breast and neck of the mother are uncovered and exposed to view.”<sup>81</sup> What had previously been seen as a physically spontaneous act came to appear as being

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<sup>75</sup> Schama, 483.

<sup>76</sup> Williams, *Rembrandt’s Women*, 102.

<sup>77</sup> Williams, 102.

<sup>78</sup> Jacob Cats quoted in Williams, 102.

<sup>79</sup> Luther also feels free to pronounce on the type of women’s breasts more suitable for the task: “Breasts are a woman’s adornment when they are well proportioned. Large and fleshy ones are not the best, do not look as good, promise much but give little. But those breasts that are full of veins and nerves, even if they are small, look attractive even on small women, and have much milk so they can nurse many children.” Martin Luther, *WA TR II*, no. 1554, p.130 quoted in Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks, *Luther on Women*, 182.

<sup>80</sup> Ellington, *From Sacred Body to Angelic Soul*, 253.

<sup>81</sup> Federico Borromeo, *Museum*, 21.



dangerously low.<sup>82</sup> Physical purity required women, in particular, to dress and act accordingly. If Mary were to remain the symbol of purity for the church, she would have to be fully clothed, “as far removed from all physical involvement as possible.”<sup>83</sup> By the middle of the sixteenth century, women’s nakedness had become shameful, indeed all displays of nudity were deemed unfitting for religious subjects. It was at this time that Pope Paul IV (1555-59) had all the nudes in Michelangelo’s *Last Judgement* in the Sistine Chapel ‘clothed’.<sup>84</sup> Nakedness became associated with sexual laxity. It is not surprising that it was during the sixteenth century that artists largely abandoned depictions of the Virgin with the child at her breast.<sup>85</sup>

## Conclusion

As a scene of domestic contentment, this painting appears to exemplify Rembrandt’s hopes. Its size and subject matter suggest also an advertisement for his capabilities as a painter of large scale biblical works, possibly even altarpieces. Rembrandt’s reference to both iconographic and religious conventions is balanced by the manner in which the subject reflects the moral values held within the Amsterdam of his day. Its apparent purchase by a Reformed couple shows that, within the Protestant home, such an image would have been acceptable. Mary as a *huisvrouw* was a venerable example.<sup>86</sup>

Much of the importance of the *Holy Family* (1635) as an indication of the Protestant acceptability of this work lies in its provenance. The *Corpus* proposes that this painting is one mentioned in the estate of Oopjen Coppit’s second husband Maerten Daey. The bequest records: “een shilderij van Joseph en Maria, gedaen door Rembrandt” (a painting of Joseph and Mary done by Rembrandt) as being allocated to

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<sup>82</sup> Ellington, *From Sacred Body to Angelic Soul*, 253.

<sup>83</sup> Ellington, 258.

<sup>84</sup> Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 203-4.

<sup>85</sup> Warner suggests that the decline in popularity of such imagery was tied also to the controversy surrounding the Immaculate Conception. As the result of the fall, women were condemned to suffer in parturition; suckling was integrally part of that process. If Mary was, through her Immaculate Conception, freed from the penalty of sin which included the pain of birth then lactation might not be her inheritance (Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 203). Ellington ties the rejection of the imagery to an association of nudity with witchcraft – witches, as the epitome of all venality, were pictured naked. The Virgin then had to be the woman who represented the physical purity required of Catholics in particular and women in general (Ellington, *From Sacred Body to Angelic Soul*, 257).

<sup>86</sup> *Huisvrouw* is the Dutch translation of Luther’s German *Hausmutter*, a more appropriate term in this setting.

Jan Soolmans, the son of Coppit's first marriage to Marten Soolmans.<sup>87</sup> In 1634 Rembrandt made full-length pendant portraits of Marten Soolmans (1613-41) and his wife Oopjen Coppit (1611-1689) to celebrate their wedding, which took place that same year. Because of the close proximity of date it is thought that the *Holy Family* may have been acquired by the Soolmans/Coppits at this time.<sup>88</sup>

Williams echoes earlier writers in stating that the measurements of this painting coincide with the Soolmans/Coppit portraits and suggests that, despite their membership of the Reformed Church, this theme would have been particularly apt at this time as a scene of domestic contentment.<sup>89</sup> The *Corpus* notes also that, although the theme arouses associations with a "Roman Catholic milieu", such an assumption is wrong as the Soolmans/Coppit couple were of the Reformed faith.<sup>90</sup> Since many of the presumptions about the Protestant acceptability of this work centre around the allocation of the painting to Coppit's son by her first marriage, the evidence needs to be re-evaluated.

The assumption that the *Holy Family* is the work named in the Daey estate is dependent on a comparison of canvasses said to be of similar size and date. As has been noted, the date of the painting remains a subject for some debate. A comparison of the size of canvasses is also important. The Soolmans/Coppit portrait canvases are 210 x 134.5 cm. and 209 x 134 cm. respectively. The *Holy Family* canvas is 183.5 x 123.5cm. The *Corpus* notes that the canvas has been both trimmed and extended but, as referenced earlier, that reduction has been estimated to be small.<sup>91</sup> The considerable difference in both the width and depth of the portraits in comparison to those of the *Holy Family* suggests that the similarities are less obvious than has been claimed. It is noteworthy that the Daey settlement describes the painting simply as a 'painting of Joseph and Mary'. There is no mention of what type of scene this was. The central focus of this work is the Virgin and child with Joseph as a subsidiary figure and it would seem unusual that the presence of the infant Jesus would not have been noted in a description, perhaps as a Holy Family.

I suggest that the painting mentioned in the bequest could as easily have been identified as one recorded in Rembrandt's own inventory of 1656 as *Een maria mit*

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<sup>87</sup> The settlement of probate is dated 24 June 1660 (*Corpus*, Vol. II, 458).

<sup>88</sup> See Schwartz, *Rembrandt: His Life, His Paintings*, 170. See also Williams, *Rembrandt's Women*, 102.

<sup>89</sup> Williams, *Rembrandt's Women*, 102.

<sup>90</sup> *Corpus*, Vol. II, 458.

<sup>91</sup> *Corpus*, Vol. II, 452.

*een kindeken van Rembrandt* (A Virgin with a Child by Rembrandt) (lot. 78).<sup>92</sup> Since there is no indication of the date that the ‘painting of Joseph and Mary done by Rembrandt’ was acquired, the purchase of such a work could have been made at the sale that followed Rembrandt’s bankruptcy and this could be instead, the painting named in the Daey estate. Although there is little dispute that the Daey settlement of probate described a Rembrandt painting of Mary and Joseph, there is no indication of the size or any details of a particular theme. The issue is further complicated when the *Corpus* draws attention to two paintings listed in the inventory of the estate of the art dealer Johannes de Renialme drawn up in 1657 which are both described as ‘*Een Maria en Joseph van Rembrandt van Ryn*’ (a Mary and Joseph by Rembrandt van Ryn which are again not dated).<sup>93</sup> This raises the possibility that a painting of that description may have been purchased from the dealer, de Renialme’s sale, and that this also could be the work mentioned in the estate. The possibility that this painting might not be Rembrandt’s *Holy Family* (1633-35) removes some of the validation for exclusively Protestant values that commentators recognise in this work.<sup>94</sup>

This work is not simply a painting of the Holy Family in a domestic setting which sanctifies the virtues of family life. At the deeper level of biblical understanding it reveals Rembrandt’s familiarity with biblical and apocryphal text and with the artistic tradition. The allusion to the future life and death of the child is shown in the ominous shadowing and the carpenter’s tools which frame the Virgin’s nimbus. In painting the milk appearing at the Virgin’s breast, it seems Rembrandt is referring to a more deeply Catholic theology which acknowledges Mary, not as a *huisvrouw* but as integral in her own right to the plan for salvation. The Virgin’s milk symbolised Christ’s true humanity. Her milk fed Christ’s dependent human body and initiated

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<sup>92</sup> The date that this painting was made is not noted in the inventory (*Rembrandt Documents*, 357).

<sup>93</sup> *Corpus*, Vol. II, 458. What exactly these works were and their future provenance appears to be unknown.

The *Corpus* notes also that a painting sold at a later sale in Amsterdam on 22 April 1711 (coll. Isaak van Thye, Lord of Opmeer) was called “Joseph en Maria met t’Kind Jesus aen haer Bosem, konstig van Rembrandt” (Joseph and Mary with the Infant Jesus at her breast, artfully done by Rembrandt), which is more easily identified by its subject and is thought to be Rembrandt’s *Holy Family* (c.1633-35).

<sup>94</sup> The literature generally accepts that this work is most likely the painting noted in the Soolmans’ will. Schwartz, for instance, states that Marten Soolmans and Oopjen Coppit bought a *Holy Family* and since the Munich *Holy Family* was painted at the same time “it seems likely that this was the same painting” (Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book*, 203). Williams suggests it was “probably in the collection of Marten Soolmans” (Williams, *Rembrandt’s Women*, 102). Perlove and Silver, however, state that the couple “owned the artist’s *Holy Family* of c.1634-35” (Perlove and Silver, *Rembrandt’s Faith*, 18).

theological interpretations which lay outside Protestant acceptability.<sup>95</sup> The symbolism of Mary's milk translated itself into a measure of God's promise. The apostle Peter captures the metaphor of Mary's physical motherhood of Christ when he writes to the disciples, "You are new born, and, like babies, you should be hungry for nothing but milk – the spiritual honesty which will help you to grow up to salvation – now you have tasted the goodness of the Lord" (1 Peter 2:2-3).

The aptness of milk as a vehicle of compassion and favour was a common motif in art and legend. Sarah Jane Boss recounts the popular legend surrounding the origin of the rosary. The Virgin gave St. Dominic (1170-1221) the rosary and pressed milk from her breast which Dominic drank. Since the "mysteries of the incarnation are centrally concerned with the incarnation", explains Boss, "it is fitting that the motif of Mary's milk should appear in this legend."<sup>96</sup> A hundred years earlier the great Cistercian monk, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) was said to have prayed to God to come down and touch him. Instead, the Virgin appeared holding her child and directed milk from her breast into the mouth of the kneeling monk. An engraving made by the Netherland artist the Master of Zwolle c.1480 shows St. Bernard on his knees before the Virgin as she directs streams of milk from her breast into his eyes (fig.181).<sup>97</sup>

The image of the nursing breast gains its symbolic power because it evokes a powerful human emotion.<sup>98</sup> It is familiar yet problematic. Why did Rembrandt choose to re-fashion a benign subject into one that was alive with doctrinal possibilities? His *Holy Family* would have been acceptable within a Protestant society as a biblical history. Instead he reverted to an outmoded visual discourse which raised questions of iconographic propriety and theological acceptability even within the post-conciliar Catholic Church. He emphasises the nurturing dependency of the Virgin's relationship with her child by flooding her breasts with light, leaving Joseph, and to some extent even the child, as secondary to the maternal task. His *Holy Family* is also deeply personal – the face of the Madonna appears to take on the features of his bride-to-be. Rembrandt adopts Baroque technique and ideology yet emphasizes a motif which, although outdated, invites a Catholic reading of the iconography.

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<sup>95</sup> Sarah Jane Boss, "Telling the Beads: The Practice and Symbolism of the Rosary", in Sarah Jane Boss, ed. *Mary: The Complete Resource* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007): 388.

<sup>96</sup> Boss, "Telling the Beads", 388.

<sup>97</sup> For a broader explanation of the importance and meaning of the lactating Virgin in Catholic piety see Rubin, *Mother of God*, 211-214, 350 and Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 192-205.

<sup>98</sup> Boss, "Telling the Beads", 389.

A justification for a Protestant acceptability of this work lies with a reading based on its assessment as a genre piece which simply honours the place of the Virgin as exemplar of Christian motherhood. This reading is supported by an assumption that the work was originally owned by a Remonstrant couple. Although there is circumstantial evidence for the identification of this painting as one that was named in the Daey probate settlement, there are, as has been shown, other possibilities. An examination of the iconography indicates that Rembrandt's exploration of the subject was not limited to a superficial level but rather examines a range of doctrinal possibilities which are central to an understanding of Mary's motherhood within Catholic theology and devotion. Her milk becomes, at the same time, the visual paradox for her virginity, and a reference to a doctrinal dispute. Apart from her milk, says Marina Warner, "the Virgin was allowed one other human activity ... that expressed her motherhood of men ... she wept."<sup>99</sup> As the following analysis will suggest, Rembrandt was soon to replace one symbol with the other.

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<sup>99</sup> Warner, *Alone of all her Sex*, 205.

## *Death of the Virgin, 1639*

### Introduction

Rembrandt's sketch of the *Annunciation* (1635) and the painting *Holy Family* (1633-35) are both subjects which may have found a Protestant acceptability since each had a source, either in the biblical text itself or in an extrapolation of that text. Both acknowledge, however, deeper doctrinal issues which go to the heart of the theological divide between the Reformers and the Catholic Church.

What becomes increasingly clear in the study of Rembrandt's Marian work is that he used the medium of etching, with its wider commercial and devotional reach, to explore some of the more controversial aspects of Marian piety. Writers have noted the paradoxical presence of subjects that appear to be specifically 'Catholic' or made for a 'Catholic market'; this applies almost solely to Rembrandt's print production. His approach in four etchings, *Death of the Virgin* (1639), *Virgin and Child in the Clouds* (1641), *Virgin with the Instruments of the Passion* (1652) and *Virgin with Cat and Snake* (1654), appears to challenge with particular acuity, the idea that his art represented a deliberately Reformed approach to religious subjects.

At 40.9 x 31.5cm, the first of these etchings, *Death of the Virgin* (fig.182), is the fourth largest etching Rembrandt made. It takes up a theme that lies both outside the biblical text and outside the subject matter of Rembrandt's contemporaries for it was a theme long out of date within the visual tradition. Yet the popularity of this work is shown by the fact that it was reproduced in three different states and four separate printings while the plate still remained in his hands.<sup>1</sup> Biblical text has no place here for the subject relies on a different source, an evolution of popular belief based on apocryphal texts and theological wisdom. These narratives about the life and death of the Virgin had a history dating back to the second century. Visualisation of the Death of the Virgin began as early as the sixth century and the theme was later to become a common subject for Books of Hours, illuminated manuscripts and artistic

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<sup>1</sup> Clifford S. Ackley, ed. *Rembrandt's Journey: Painter, Draftsman, Etcher* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts Catalogue. 2004): 138.

representations within a Catholic world that honoured the Virgin Mary, both as the human mother of Christ and the Queen of Heaven.<sup>2</sup>

It is generally accepted that for this etching Rembrandt drew on motifs from Martin Schongauer's (1448-1491) *Death of the Virgin* (1477) (fig.183) and Albrecht Dürer's woodcut *Death of the Virgin* (fig.184) from his *Life of the Virgin Series* (1510-1520). In Amsterdam, Rembrandt would have been reminded of the theme had he entered the Oude Kerk, as it was the subject of Dirk Crabeth's stained-glass window (fig.185) made in 1555.

Rembrandt's interpretation may have drawn on the work of previous artists but his particular understanding takes this work beyond the pictorial into the theological. The narrative moves seamlessly through the physical world of death and dying to the spiritual world of afterlife. It represents the basic Christian hope in a transcendence which promises eternal life to those who believe. His dying Virgin carries not only the burden of human death but the theological concerns which accompany the knowledge of her privilege as Mother of God.

## The critics

Most major studies of Rembrandt's printed works including those of Arthur Hind, Christopher Wright and Karel Boon and Seymour Slive, give only technical details about this etching such as size and the number of states with perhaps a brief explanatory note.<sup>3</sup> Substantial commentaries have been included in some monographs of the artist which indicate the variety of responses to this work. Clifford Ackley, for example, views the etching as representative of a transition between Rembrandt's early works with their disposition towards the elaborate embellishments of the Baroque, to a deeper and more restrained vision which began to emerge in his work from the 1640s. He describes the subject of the Virgin's death and Rembrandt's

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<sup>2</sup> A Book of Hours was a finely illuminated prayer book for the wealthy layman or woman. It followed roughly the hours of a priest's breviary and included penitential psalms and prayers for the dead. The most important element was the Hours of the Virgin Mary which included psalms, readings and hymns arranged in eight sections: matins, lauds, prime, terce, sext, none, vespers and compline, to be said in honour of the Virgin Mary on each of the seven days of the week.

<sup>3</sup> Hind notes a relationship in this work to various studies of Saskia ill in bed (Hind, *A Catalogue of Rembrandt's Etchings*, 84). Wright and Boon note only the various impressions (*Rembrandt's Etchings* (Amsterdam: Van Gendt and Company, 1969), 54). Schwartz records only technical details and notes that it is an apocryphal theme with a long visual tradition. See Schwartz, *The Complete Etchings of Rembrandt*, B99.

interpretation as an “acquired taste” when compared with some of his “more refined religious narratives.”<sup>4</sup>

Williams notes a loose connection between Rembrandt’s etching and Dürer’s print and also to Crabeth’s window in the Oude Kerk. She draws attention to Rembrandt’s own personal life and to the various studies he made of his sick wife, Saskia. These, she thinks, must have informed his depiction of the dying Virgin, observations that have also been noted by Arthur Hind.<sup>5</sup>

The anachronistic quality of this subject in the Post-Reformation Dutch Republic is emphasised by Gary Schwartz.<sup>6</sup> He suggests a reason for Rembrandt’s interest in such a theme: she was “the holy human Rembrandt came closest to worshipping.”<sup>7</sup> Surprisingly, he links such interest to Rembrandt’s association with the Waterland Community (a community of Mennonites) in Amsterdam whose congregation had provided Rembrandt with several commissions.<sup>8</sup>

Focused analysis of this work has sought to accommodate such a ‘Catholic’ subject within a Protestant definition of Rembrandt and his biblical work by re-identifying motifs and reading the iconography to accommodate Reformed sensibilities. An early study by Gerard Brom (1926) claims that this etching shows, “hoe de meester een middeleeuwsche stof protestantizeerde” (how the master makes material from the Middle-Ages Protestant). Artists until Rembrandt’s time had given this final farewell “de vorm van een kerklike bedizening” (the form of ecclesiastical rites). Brom’s reading of this work argues that by leaving out these rites, Rembrandt has changed a Catholic interpretation to one that represents a Reformed understanding of the Virgin.<sup>9</sup>

In a further study of the etching, Ronald Bernier identifies the central scene of the death itself as a “secular death of an ordinary woman in a secular society”, a reflection of “typical Dutch-Calvinist custom regarding the last rites at the moment of death”

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<sup>4</sup> Ackley, *Rembrandt’s Journey*, 138. Nadine Orenstein also notes that this is the most baroque of Rembrandt’s prints with its angels, clouds and naturalistic detail. See Orenstein, “Rembrandt’s *Death of the Virgin*”, in Walter Liedtke, Carolyn Logan, Nadine M. Orenstein and Stephanie Dickey, eds. *Rembrandt/Not Rembrandt in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: Aspects of Connoisseurship* (New York: Abrams, 1995), 205.

<sup>5</sup> Williams, *Rembrandt’s Women*, 165.

<sup>6</sup> Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book*, 351.

<sup>7</sup> Schwartz, 351.

<sup>8</sup> Schwartz states that the Mennonites had a particular devotion to the Virgin Mary. He suggest that Rembrandt may have been inspired by his contacts with men such as Hendrick Uylenburgh, Cornelis Claesz. Anslø and Lieven van Coppenol from the Waterland community. Schwartz, 351.

<sup>9</sup> Gerard Brom, “De Traditie in Rembrandt’s Dood van Maria”, *Oud Holland* 43 (1926): 112.



where the *predikant* (minister) conducts the ceremony at the bedside surrounded by family and friends.<sup>10</sup> A recent study of this work by Elissa Auerbach unties this work from its religious moorings and reads it as a non-theological account of Mary's death. Rembrandt, she says, has removed Catholic signs and symbols, a move which calls into question any confessional proclivity.<sup>11</sup> In a substantial entry in their recent book on Rembrandt's faith, Perlove and Silver describe this work as "Rembrandt's most ambitious Catholic subject" but they identify a Reformist emphasis.<sup>12</sup> They note that Rembrandt clearly draws on a number of graphic sources but that his interpretation is unique in fundamental ways.<sup>13</sup> They suggest that to make the subject less Catholic, he avoided elements associated with rituals. They tie the subject itself to an emphasis on a 'good death' found in Protestant funeral sermons and spiritual biographies.<sup>14</sup> These views will be addressed later in the analysis.

## A history of the image

Narratives from the canonical Gospels speak sparingly of the presence of the Virgin at critical moments in Christ's life but they give no account of her life after Christ's death. This silence has invited story-telling. From the second century tales of the Virgin's death circulated in the near east, in Syria and Palestine, Egypt and Ethiopia.<sup>15</sup> Accounts multiplied after the Council of Ephesus (431). Interest arose both in her childhood and in her last days on earth. The last words of Christ on the cross, where he gave Mary's care into the hands of the Apostle John (John 19: 26-27), excited Christian imagination; it raised questions about the time after John received her into his house and the manner of her death.<sup>16</sup>

Fanciful accounts of Mary's death led to abundant literature on the Dormition (the death of the Virgin) and of the *Transitus Marie* (the manner of her passage from this world to the next). Two models developed; both are derived from documents dating from the second half of the sixth century. According to the gospel of *Pseudo-Meliton*,

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<sup>10</sup> Ronald J. Bernier, "The Economy of Salvation: Narrative and Liminality in Rembrandt's Death of the Virgin", *Religion and the Arts* 9 (2005): 177.

<sup>11</sup> Elissa Auerbach, "Taking Mary's Pulse: Cartesianism and Modernity in Rembrandt's *Death of the Virgin*", in Jessica Goethals, Valerie McGuire and Gaoheng Zhang, eds. *Power and Image in Early Modern Europe* (Newcastle on Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2008): 95.

<sup>12</sup> Perlove and Silver, *Rembrandt's Faith*, 45.

<sup>13</sup> Perlove and Silver, 47.

<sup>14</sup> Perlove and Silver, 48-49.

<sup>15</sup> Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 81.

<sup>16</sup> Tavad, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary*, 23.

the Virgin lived for twenty-two years after the Ascension. When she was warned by an angel that she was to die in three day's time she expressed a wish that all the apostles be there at her bedside and that she would not see the devil before her death. The apostles were miraculously brought to her bedside and Christ appeared with the angels to protect her from the devil. She died and was buried, but immediately resurrected and taken to heaven.<sup>17</sup>

In the second model found in the gospel of *Pseudo-John*, as the Virgin was praying at the Holy Sepulchre, the angel Gabriel appeared and told her she would die on Sunday. She returned to her home in Bethlehem and asked for the presence of the apostles at her bedside. They arrived with a retinue of angels amidst a series of miracles. The Jews, alerted by the commotion, tried to seize Mary and the apostles, but they were removed from the scene by the angels. Mary died; her soul was taken to heaven and, in imitation of her son, her body was carried to Paradise by the angels.<sup>18</sup> By the end of the sixth century the popularity of these stories, which reflected the honour and esteem in which the 'Theotokos' (the Mother of God), was held, saw a festival inaugurated by imperial decree to celebrate her Dormition on 15 August.<sup>19</sup>

Although little known in their original form, these texts found a popular re-telling in the work of a thirteenth-century Dominican priest, Jacobus de Voragine's 'Readings of the Saints', the *Legenda Aurea* (*The Golden Legend* c.1260).<sup>20</sup> It is mainly from this text that art and devotion filled in the details of the Virgin's life.

*The Golden Legend* states that the Virgin Mary was seventy-two years old when she expressed the wish to see her son again. An angel came from paradise bearing a palm frond and a message: in three days she would be assumed from her body because her Son was waiting for his venerable mother. The Virgin replied with a final wish, that the apostles be brought to her bedside so that she might be buried by them and render her spirit to God in their presence. This transpires. The apostles are miraculously brought to her side; she dies and Christ comes to receive her soul.<sup>21</sup>

These traditions are not unanimous in their belief that an assumption took place. Some early narratives omit this event. Mary's soul is gathered up but her body remains earth-bound. Such narratives conclude that Christ himself descended to take

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<sup>17</sup> Tavad, 23-25.

<sup>18</sup> Tavad, 23-25.

<sup>19</sup> Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, 207.

<sup>20</sup> *The Golden Legend*, Vols. I, II.

<sup>21</sup> *The Golden Legend*, Vol. II, 78-79.

Mary's soul. Her body was then transported to a hidden place where it awaits reunion with her soul at the end of time as is recounted in both an earlier *Liber Requieti* (third or fourth century) and the *Pseudo-Melito* versions.<sup>22</sup> In other Dormition narratives, the Virgin's body and soul are separated for only three to four days after which she is, like her son, resurrected and translated bodily to heaven.<sup>23</sup>

Visualisations of these scenes went hand-in-hand with the texts themselves. Pelikan sees the most complete Byzantine iconographic treatment of the theme as dating from the sixth century.<sup>24</sup> Early Dormition iconography, however, is found in a fresco in the church of Santa Maria Egiziana in Rome dated to around 872-82. Some Eastern iconic versions survive from c.850-950 but the earliest extant image is found in the British Isles. The Wirksworth Slab, dating from the late eighth or ninth century shows the Virgin being borne to her burial.<sup>25</sup>

Most early representations show the Virgin laid out on a bier, in the Byzantine manner, with Christ standing behind the body, with some or all of the apostles in attendance. He has come to collect the soul of his mother and is shown holding, what Warner describes as "her papoose-like soul as if he has plucked it from her very heart" (fig.186).<sup>26</sup> This iconography was adopted in the West until around the fourteenth century, when the format began to change. In Dormition scenes in Northern Europe, the apostles became disposed in different positions and they were given jobs to do. Some read, some prayed, some mourned, some took part in a religious service. The angle of the bed was commonly changed from parallel to the picture plane to oblique.<sup>27</sup> These were the motifs with which artists such as Hugo Van der Goes (d.1482) (fig.187), Pieter Bruegel (c.1525-69) (fig.188) Dürer, Schongauer and later, Caravaggio, engaged. It was in this visual tradition that Rembrandt's *Death of the Virgin* had its roots.

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<sup>22</sup> Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition and Assumption* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 3.

<sup>23</sup> Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary*, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Pelikan, *Mary, Through the Centuries*, 207.

<sup>25</sup> Cartlidge and Elliott, *Art and the Apocrypha*, 45-46.

<sup>26</sup> Warner, *Alone of All her Sex*, 81.

<sup>27</sup> Susan Koslow gives a detailed account of the ways in which the iconography of the Death of the Virgin, evolved from early Byzantine representations to the relatively naturalised versions which were to influence Dürer, Schongauer and eventually Rembrandt. See Koslow "The Impact of Hugo van der Goes' Mental Illness and late Medieval Religious Attitudes to *Death of the Virgin*" in Charles E. Rosenberg, ed. *Healing and History: Essays for George Rosen* (New York: Neale Watson Academic Publications, 1972), 27-50.

## Seeking a source

Although the story of Rembrandt's *Death of the Virgin* can be traced, through the visual tradition, to Jacobus de Voragine's *The Golden Legend*, it is doubtful that he would have read the work himself. Bob Haak suggests that Rembrandt could not have read the text since he introduced details, a group of women around the bed and the seated man in the foreground, which are not included in the story.<sup>28</sup> Regardless of whether or not Rembrandt had read the text, the iconography would have been known to him through the visual tradition.

Rembrandt's debt to Schongauer's, Dürer's, and Crabeth's work has been acknowledged. All show the Virgin Mary stretched out on a canopied bed in a domestic space, surrounded by a group of apostles. All visualise the trappings of a final religious ceremony. A celebrant, in Dürer's case – a bishop with identifying mitre, probably representing Peter as first bishop of the church, is also present, as is the beloved disciple John who places a lighted candle in the dying Virgin's hand. So too are the apostles crowding around the bed, as the apocryphal gospels tell us they did. In both cases, a disciple reads a text, presumably the scriptures, from the foot of the bed.

Dürer has reversed Schongauer's scene, since the beds face in opposite directions and the groups of figures appear almost as mirror images of each other. Crabeth too follows this same tradition. He includes the apostles around the bed, he places the candle in the Virgin's hand and he suggests that same Catholic ceremony of final blessing; a bucket and sprinkler sit in the foreground of his drawing for the stained glass window, but he makes an addition to the iconography, he adds a suggestion of the heavenly sphere.

Rembrandt borrows from these artists certain aspects for his own iconography. There is a similarity in the canopied beds raised at the head to display the Virgin and a similarity in the group around the bed. Rembrandt, however, takes the scene and breaks it open both visually and theologically. He introduces another world which offers a glimpse of transcendence; a billowing light inhabited by welcoming angels issues from the heavens into the scene below. In this way he suggests two interpretations. The central angel, as a heavenly messenger, could be the angel who

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<sup>28</sup> Haak, *Rembrandt, His Life Work and Times*, 161.

comes to warn the Virgin of her impending death or the angel who has come to receive the Virgin's soul, both popular themes in early narratives.<sup>29</sup>

There is no suggestion of that other world in either Schongauer or Dürer's interpretations. The source of light in both these works is immediate and frontal. In Dürer's case there was no necessity to introduce this aspect because the next scene in his *Life of the Virgin* series was an *Assumption* presented as a separate work and it is here that Dürer shows the heavens opening to welcome the Virgin Mary.

Both Schongauer and Dürer limit the locus to the confines of a room. Crabeth's stained-glass window does, however, intimate another world. This can be seen in the tight working of a cloud structure in the centre top of his window, but it remains merely a suggestion of a heavenly realm, devoid of angels or other identifying characteristics. All three artists include a religious ceremony taking place but Rembrandt does not. He re-arranges this setting to include an ambiguous group of quasi-religious figures at the bottom left of the etching. It is this lack of a defined religious ceremony that Brom, Bernier, Auerbach and Perlove and Silver identify as Rembrandt's protestanisation of this Catholic theme. Since these analyses are pivotal in that discussion some points need to be clarified.

The liturgical ceremony that Schongauer, Dürer, and Crabeth show is not a final anointing before death. The ceremony about to take place is identified by the motifs the artists include. The *aspersorium* (small bucket of water) and the *aspergillum* (the sprinkler) are used for the blessing which reverences the body *after* death and prior to burial. The Ordo of 1614 reflected two strands of Christian belief, death as a triumph and reward and death as an ordeal; water sprinkled on the body after death was a sign of baptism and birth into the life of Christ and it also symbolized purification from sin.<sup>30</sup> The censer with its burning incense, which these artists also include, is also part of that final posthumous ceremony. The burning incense is symbolic of prayer rising to heaven.<sup>31</sup>

The distinction between the final sacramental anointing with oil before death (Extreme Unction) and the blessing with water which honours the body after death does not appear to have been recognised in the Rembrandt literature. Perlove and Silver, for instance, conflate the sacrament and the blessing. They speak of the priest,

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<sup>29</sup> The *Golden Legend*, 80-83.

<sup>30</sup> Fink, ed. *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, 142.

<sup>31</sup> The incense had a two-fold mission, both practical and spiritual. It was used as a sign of prayer rising to the heavens, it was also used to counter the smell of death and to guard against the spread of disease.

in Dürer's woodcut, as sprinkling the oil of unction and of another figure beside who holds the "pail with the oil".<sup>32</sup> The anointing with oil takes place before death and oil is applied by touch; it is not sprinkled. The administration of that sacrament is beautifully captured in Rogier van der Weyden's *Seven Sacrament's Altarpiece* (c.1445-1450) (fig.189) where the priest is shown anointing the back of the hand with oil as an acolyte waits with a piece of wadding to wipe off the surplus. The sprinkling with water is a non-sacramental ceremony which takes place after death and precedes a burial. Rembrandt may well have omitted this detail since he indicates that no burial will take place; the Virgin is about to be assumed into Heaven.

While the presence of identifying motifs in these scenes can indicate a specific (Catholic) ceremony taking place and a specific moment in the final ritual of death, their absence does not necessarily imply a Protestant reading of this scene. Hugo van der Goes (d.1482) for example, a lay-brother in a priory in Bruges, does not show a liturgical service taking place in his *Death of the Virgin* (c.1470) (fig.187). This is a dormition; the Virgin is already dead, or appears to be so. Christ and his angels are gathered together, enclosed in a mandorla above her bed waiting to receive her soul. The book of the gospels has been closed and an apostle snuffs out the candle.<sup>33</sup>

The Italian painter Federico Zuccaro (c.1540-1609) (fig.190) includes only a palm branch and a long-shafted menorah (the Jewish seven-branched candle) in his *Death of the Virgin*, a preliminary drawing for his fresco in the Pucci Chapel in SS. Trinità del Monti (c.1589). Nor do the earlier artists, Giotto (*Death of the Virgin*, 1310) (fig.191) or Fra Angelico *Death of the Virgin*, (1443-44, Museo Diocesano, Cortona, Italy) give an indication of a particular religious ceremony taking place. Perhaps the best known depiction of this scene, Caravaggio's *Death of the Virgin* (1606) (fig.192), gives no indication of a religious ceremony; a religious reading of this event is found only in his subtle iconography. There is no obvious allusion to the heavenly sphere; there are no angels, there is no sense of upward movement. But Pamela Askew's study of Caravaggio's painting reveals iconography and allusion which place the idea of the Assumption at the centre of his vision.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Perlove and Silver, *Rembrandt's Faith*, 48. Auerbach also identifies this ceremony as one of Extreme Unction (Auerbach, 99).

<sup>33</sup> Although a candle is often present in scenes from the death of the Virgin, it is not part of the rubrics of the final blessing.

<sup>34</sup> See Askew, *Caravaggio's Death of the Virgin*.

While the works of Dürer, Schongauer and Crabeth may suggest a Catholic response to the subject in that they include a religious ceremony taking place, earlier iconography shows that this was by no means the only tradition for representations of this theme. It could as easily be argued that since Dürer and Schongauer, and even Caravaggio, all omit visual reference to Mary's *transitus* and a heavenly realm to which she was ascending, they suggest a normal human death. Their visualizations would then come closer to a Protestant acceptance of the scene.

Despite some similarities with these artists, another work, I suggest, provides a more obvious inspiration for Rembrandt's iconography of the *Death of the Virgin*. The French engraver Jacques Callot's small engraving, *Mors Beatae Virginis Mariae* (1633) (fig.193) from his *Life of the Virgin* series, shares similar transcendent qualities with Rembrandt's etching. There are a number of motifs that Callot has evoked to which Rembrandt appears to have responded. Callot's Virgin lies on a canopied bed set at an oblique angle, surrounded by a group which appears to include at least one woman in the left foreground. Most striking is the way Callot frames the scene, as Rembrandt later does, by a curtained wall to the right, a sub-scene to the left and a heavenly eruption which shows Christ surrounded by angels coming to welcome the Virgin. Diane Russell notes that Callot's religious works represented themes stressed by Counter-Reformation theologians, as well as adopting those themes already lingering from pre-Reformation times.<sup>35</sup> Callot, as an ardent Catholic, reflected the demand for religious images from numerous religious orders and the public alike. Between 1631 and 1634 he executed nearly six hundred religious prints.

Rembrandt's debt to the work of Callot has long been recognized. It is a commonplace to acknowledge his emulation of Callot's scenes of beggars in his own early etchings and drawings of that subject.<sup>36</sup> There was a book of Callot's works, *All of Jerusalem* (1620), found among Rembrandt's books in his inventory of 1657.<sup>37</sup> Although this was not the book that would have contained his *Life of the Virgin* series, neither was it the book which contained the series of prints of *Les Gueux* (the beggars)

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<sup>35</sup> H. Diane Russell, *Jacques Callot, Prints and Related Drawings* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1975), 155.

<sup>36</sup> See Münz, *Rembrandt's Etchings*, 15; Rosenberg, *Rembrandt, Life and Work*, 240-241; Hinterding, Luijten, Royalton-Kisch, *Rembrandt the Printmaker*, 13-14; Carolyn Logan, "Old Man Leaning on a Stick" in *Rembrandt/Not Rembrandt in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Abrams, 1994), 160.

<sup>37</sup> Rembrandt's inventory (no. 255), *Rembrandt Documents*, 160.

that Rembrandt is said to have emulated.<sup>38</sup> It does confirm, however, that Rembrandt was familiar with other sources of Callot's *oeuvre*. Scholars have failed to make any association between this etching and Rembrandt's *Death of the Virgin*, a link which appears to be an important one.

Another source should be considered. Auerbach refers to the *Ars Moriendi* (the art of dying) literature as a contributing factor in the popularity of the subject of the death of the Virgin.<sup>39</sup> *Ars Moriendi*, Emile Mâle explains, is one of the most curious monuments of art and thought in the fifteenth century, since it vivifies the final struggle between good and evil, thought to take place at the deathbed.<sup>40</sup> Eamon Duffy writes about the overwhelming preoccupation of clergy and laity alike with the safe transition of their souls from this world to the next.<sup>41</sup> Texts, theatre, and morality plays fixed on the irresistibility of death. The *Ars Moriendi* emphasized the importance of bringing the dying person to knowledge of their condition and to encourage in them a declaration of faith and repentance.<sup>42</sup> A popular block-book gave vision to this final struggle.<sup>43</sup> Artwork showed the bedroom with striking images of repentant sinners, saints, God the Father and God the Son to one side and the power of the devil to the other (fig.194). Curiously, the central figure of the dying Christian remained passive.<sup>44</sup> There are certain structural elements of this imagery which Rembrandt himself appears to adopt. To the bottom left of his work, as will be shown, he gathers Jewish and Christian elements obviously prayerfully attending the death of the Virgin. To the bottom right, a group shows elements of despair, indifference and evil.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> This series of twenty-five small prints was produced in 1622 and appeared to attract an almost immediate following among the artists of Rembrandt's day. See Gary Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book*, 288-289.

<sup>39</sup> Auerbach, "Taking Mary's Pulse", 98.

<sup>40</sup> Mâle, *Religious Art from the Twelfth to the Eighteenth Century*, 150-161.

<sup>41</sup> Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 301.

<sup>42</sup> Eamon Duffy, 315.

<sup>43</sup> This treatise appeared somewhere between 1414 and 1418 in Florence and was quickly translated. It was reduced to a vivid series of eleven pictures with a brief accompanying text. It circulated throughout Europe and, because of its illustrations, was accessible even to the illiterate. See Eamon Duffy, 316-317.

<sup>44</sup> Eamon Duffy, 317.

<sup>45</sup> Eamon Duffy, 303-310. Auerbach points out the popularity of such literature even in Rembrandt's time. The Jesuit Roberto Bellarmine's (1542-1621) classic text *De arte bene moriendi* (The Art of Dying Well) was printed in fifty-six editions. It was translated into ten languages including Dutch. An edition was published in Latin by Willem Jansz. Blaeu in Amsterdam in 1626 and may well have been known to Rembrandt. See Auerbach, footnote, 68.



A stronger link can be made between Rembrandt's *Death of the Virgin* and *Ars Moriendi* through an allegorical and seemingly random etching made in the same year that Rembrandt made *Death of the Virgin*. Rembrandt's *Death Appearing to a Wedded Couple from an Open Grave* (1639) (fig.195) shows a young couple face to face with a skeleton which emerges from a tomb, a scythe in one hand and an hour-glass in the other. Above the tomb hangs a symbol of self-recognition, a mirror. This is a subject unlike any Rembrandt had made before and he never returned to that genre again. It illustrates the universal power of death; a couple is confronted by an image of themselves both as they are and as they soon will be. This is a typical representation of a type of medieval literature and illustration known as the *danse macabre* (fig.196), where the living are faced with skeletal remains or desiccated corpses as a reminder that life is short and death inevitable. The imagery used here was commonly associated with *Ars Moriendi* literature and art and it seems obvious that Rembrandt was familiar with both the iconography and its meaning.<sup>46</sup>

## Doctrinal issues

The complex iconography of Rembrandt's *Death of a Virgin* reads as a meditation on earthly expectation and eschatological promise. Rembrandt conflates two episodes singularly important within the Catholic tradition, those of the Death and the Assumption of the Virgin. Both of these episodes are intimately tied with and in fact dependent upon a presumption of Mary's Immaculate Conception.<sup>47</sup> There is, as Askew suggests, a necessity for recapitulating the traditional Catholic view of the Virgin's death since it is less familiar today than it was in the past.<sup>48</sup> It will also establish the historical and theological frame in which Rembrandt conceived his image.

The special case Mary presents has engaged theologians for many centuries. Issues of dying and death with its subsequent concerns over morbidity and decay were

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<sup>46</sup> Mâle describes the *danse macabre* as part of a fifteenth-century obsession with death and dying. Here the living are faced with skeletons or desiccated corpses. "The dead man is the double of the living. He is the image of what the living will soon become..." See Emile Mâle, 142-150.

<sup>47</sup> The dogma of the Immaculate Conception, finally realized in the papal bull *Ineffabilis Deus* in 1854, mandates the belief within the Catholic Church that Mary, the woman chosen to be the earthly mother of God was herself born without sin. Sarah Jane Boss, "The Development of the Doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception", in Sarah Jane Boss, ed. *Mary, The Complete Resource*, 207. This belief gives rise to great theological questions: if Mary was born without sin would she be subject to the results of sin that is, would her human body die and if so what would happen to it?

<sup>48</sup> Askew, *Caravaggio's Death of the Virgin*, 19.

unthinkable for “the life-giving body that bore God.”<sup>49</sup> Mary could not be considered a “mere” mortal. Her incorrupt body was deemed to have been spared by virtue of divine privilege.<sup>50</sup> The rise in diverse yet similar traditions surrounding the death of the Virgin during the fifth and sixth centuries responded to a growing interest in the divinity of Christ and in the transforming effect that divinity had on his own humanity.<sup>51</sup> The spill-over of that interest fell on those closest to him. Mary, his mother, became the focus of increased exaltation for her role in salvation history. It was assumed that as Christ had died a mortal death, so too did the Virgin, despite the lack of any historical record. As Christ’s body did not remain among the dead and suffer mortal decay, then surely the Virgin’s body similarly avoided that fate.

By the end of the fifteenth century, stories of her immediate entry into heaven came to be linked with the death and resurrection of Christ. Consequently, the idea of her own assumption, body and soul, became vigorously propagated.<sup>52</sup> Widely-held belief acknowledged that, as ‘the first fruits of human incorruptibility’, her death had been followed immediately by a resurrection and assumption.<sup>53</sup> Despite the lack of biblical sanction, there is, explains Ellington, a “theological logic to the Assumption of Mary that had caused it to seem reasonable, if not provable, to Catholics in any age.”<sup>54</sup>

While the death and Assumption of the Virgin had been validated in art and popular piety from the early centuries of the church, the same theological logic did not appeal to the Reformers. Martin Luther progressively altered his position about the death and Assumption of the Virgin. In 1519, while preaching on the need to prepare for a happy death, he advised calling on the Virgin Mary in that final hour.<sup>55</sup> Between the years 1522-27 he spoke of the Virgin’s sinlessness but doubts began to enter about her Immaculate Conception. In a sermon preached in 1527, where he discussed Mary’s conception and the effects of original sin, he suggested a type of double conception. Her body was conceived with the effects of original sin but another conception occurred, namely the infusion of the soul: “it is believed that it took place

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<sup>49</sup> Brian E. Daley, “At the Hour of Our Death: Mary’s Dormition and Christian Dying in Late Patristic and Early Byzantine Literature”, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 55 (2001): 30.

<sup>50</sup> Askew, 21.

<sup>51</sup> Daley, “At the Hour of our Death”, 72.

<sup>52</sup> Askew, *Caravaggio’s Death of the Virgin*, 23.

<sup>53</sup> Pelikan, *Mary, Through the Centuries*, 209.

<sup>54</sup> Ellington, *From Sacred Body to Angelic Soul*, 103.

<sup>55</sup> O’Meara, *Mary in Protestant and Catholic Theology*, 117.

without contracting original sin.”<sup>56</sup> By 1532 Luther denied any special conception, claiming “Mary is conceived in sin just like us ...”<sup>57</sup> The Assumption, a belief contingent on the Immaculate Conception and apparently, to this point, taken for granted, was declared an aspect of a hypocritical (Catholic) church and abandoned.<sup>58</sup> Luther wiped that feast-day from his calendar.<sup>59</sup> In his *Sermon on the Visitation* (1532) given on the day of Mary’s ascension, he declared:

The feast of the ascension of Mary is completely papist, that is, full of blasphemy and established without any grounding in Scripture. For that reason we have let it lapse in our churches.... The most annoying and dangerous thing about making this ascension a feast is that people honour the Virgin Mary and call to her ...<sup>60</sup>

Luther summed up the Protestant view; there was nothing in scripture to justify a belief in Mary’s Immaculate Conception; there was nothing in scripture to justify a belief in her Assumption. More dangerously, the belief in her presence in heaven opened the way for people to honour her and to appeal to her for help.

Rembrandt does not limit himself to a scene of Mary’s death, which may have been acceptable as reference to a visual tradition. Schongauer and Dürer confine themselves to the event itself. Rembrandt’s celestial intrusion pours down into finite space, leaving no doubt that an assumption is the culminating event of this earthly dying. Nowhere has this belief been so visually established. Rembrandt embraces the apocryphal histories and he is aware of doctrinal possibilities; he is aware also of Mary as an historical person.

Rembrandt’s particular innovation was to show Mary’s death within the context of her Jewish history. Hans Urs von Balthasar notes the importance of Mary’s heritage. At first, he says, it was she who introduced Christ into the Old Covenant and “thereby trained him for his messianic office.” Mary’s role was reversed, he says, when the Holy Spirit showed Christ who he was and what he had to do.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> O’Meara, 117-118.

<sup>57</sup> Martin Luther, *WA* 36, 141, quoted in O’Meara, 118.

<sup>58</sup> O’Meara, 118.

<sup>59</sup> Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 96.

<sup>60</sup> Martin Luther, *Sermon on the Visitation held according to the ordinances of Brandenburg and Nuremberg on the day of Mary’s ascension. 1532, WA LII* quoted in Karant-Nunn and Wiesner Hanks, *Luther on Women*, 46-47.

<sup>61</sup> Hans Urs Von Balthasar and Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Mary, The Church at the Source* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 107.

## The iconography

Bernier's study of the *Death of the Virgin* sees this scene as setting up an 'ambiguous relationship' between the secular and the sacred. An episode is recorded, he says, which has no fixed moment in historical time but which shifts constantly between "divine majesty and secular tragedy."<sup>62</sup> Rembrandt consciously includes elements which navigate a world of controversial beliefs and blurred boundaries. This scene appears to be neither quite a death nor quite an assumption but fixes on the prospect of both, the last seconds of life or perhaps what Nicholas Conostas refers to as "the middle state of souls" - the intermediate stage between death and resurrection.<sup>63</sup>

Spatially, the etching is divided into three registers which are not only visually indicated but also technically inscribed. A human, earth-bound scene, tightly etched and carefully articulated, occupies the lower half of the picture plane. Above, there is a concept of a heavenly sphere, indicated by loosely contrived clouds and a tumble of angels, which issues from a source of radiant light. But the scene is not one of distinct realms; they merge equivocally into each other both horizontally and vertically. A middle distance is formed between the two levels by a lavish bed which encloses the body of the Virgin Mary.

The Virgin's bed is dwarfed by a great space. The etched cross-beams above the bed and to the left of the clouds suggest that, within that space, Rembrandt is making visual reference to the earlier miracle, the birth of Christ in the stable in Bethlehem. He is, in fact, compressing three events, which show Mary's privileged place within the redemption narrative: the birth of her son, her own death and her assumption into heaven.

The visual focus is directed by clever placement of figures and subtle lighting to the form of the dying woman on the bed. The bed is not centred but lies to the left of the central axis. Not only does it assume vast proportions in relation to the characters, but it stands on a dais two steps above the spectators. It is also raised at the head in such a way as to deny realistic perspective.

At the centre of the etching, ideologically if not spatially, is the Virgin Mary. She is attended by two male figures. Surrounding the bed are overlapping figures displaying various attitudes of grief, curiosity and even indifference. Despite her

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<sup>62</sup> Bernier, "The Economy of Salvation", 177.

<sup>63</sup> Nicholas Conostas, "To Sleep, Perchance to Dream": The Middle State of Souls in Patristic and Byzantine Literature", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 55 (2001): 91.

importance as the central character, she is only lightly etched. Her status is implied by the diagonal shaft of light which streams through the side of the bed and by the throne-like qualities of the bed itself. She was the mother of Christ; she facilitated the transition from the old religion to the new. She was the first Christian, but she was also Jewish. Rembrandt acknowledges that. To the left of her bed, where Schongauer and Dürer picture preparations for a Catholic ritual, Rembrandt shows elements of a different religious ceremony taking place.

Rembrandt returns such ceremony to the Jewish tradition where it should be in an as yet un-formed church. At the table, impressively dressed with a heavy carpet, sits a man reading from the Scriptures. It is obviously a Hebrew text. The text reads from right to left: there is a suggestion of capital letters to the right of each page. The reader, elaborately dressed in a turban and fur cape, has his left hand on the book as if he has been turning pages which are dog-eared on the left in the reverse of a typical Latin, Dutch or English text. (fig.197).<sup>64</sup> In his right hand he holds his glasses and the cloth in which the sacred text would have been wrapped.<sup>65</sup>

Towering enigmatically over this group is a bearded figure his hands lightly clasped in front of him. This figure is identified by both Brom and Bernier as a 'High Priest' (fig.198).<sup>66</sup> The figure is dressed in an ornate mitre and cope, typical dress for a Catholic bishop. Together with the tonsured acolyte who stands beside him, a tall skeptron in his hands, these figures suggest, that, for these details at least, Rembrandt refers to Catholic iconography.<sup>67</sup>

Rembrandt, however, replaces the tall cross carried by a similar figure in both Schongauer and Dürer's works with a skeptron crowned not with a cross, but with

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<sup>64</sup> Rembrandt uses this same motif in an earlier work *Judas Returning the Thirty Pieces of Silver* (1629), where, in the lower left hand corner, he shows a back view of a High Priest and illuminates a similar text with Hebrew lettering and similar pages dog-eared on the left, which is lying on the table before him.

<sup>65</sup> Brom suggests this *repoussoir* figure recalls medieval iconography where a reader sitting before a book represents the church. In this work however, he identifies him as a visual device which focuses attention on the Virgin (De Traditie in Rembrandt's *Dood van Maria*, 112). Marijn Schapelhouman suggests also that this figure represents the church. See Marijn Schapelhouman, "The Death of the Virgin" in Erik Hinterding, Ger Luitjen and Martin Royalton-Kisch, eds. *Rembrandt the Printmaker* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2000), 162.

<sup>66</sup> Bernier, *The Economy of Salvation*, 185, Brom, *Dood van Maria*, 113.

<sup>67</sup> This may not be as closely related to Catholic ecclesiastical attire as Zell later points out. Leviticus 8: 1-9 spells out the dress for Jewish ceremonial attire. The writer speaks of Aaron placing on his son's head a turban "at its front, he placed the golden plate, the holy Crown, just as the Lord had commanded Moses." The *miznefet*, the name given to this ornate headdress, is commonly referred to also as a mitre. Rabbi Dr. J. Epstein, trans. *The Soncino Babylonian Talmud*, <http://www.halakhah.com/> [accessed March 16, 2010].

what Michael Zell describes as a diminutive of Torah ornamentation, a decorative curve which underscores the resemblance with the central ornament of Jewish liturgy, the Torah crown.<sup>68</sup> Zell notes that Rembrandt equips his High Priests with elaborate ecclesiastical attire “ironically derived from the attributes of Christian bishops.”<sup>69</sup> The High Priest waits, as does the reader; all attention is on the Virgin.

Bernier identifies the male figure reading from the Scriptures as St. Peter “in priestly habit taking the ministerial lead amongst his fellow apostles conducting the final prayers of a Requiem Mass.”<sup>70</sup> There seems little to associate the seated figure with the role Bernier assigns him. A study by Marieke de Winkel shows that figures from Rembrandt’s biblical works can be identified through their mode of dress. Rembrandt, according to de Winkel, used particular forms of dress to distinguish Old Testament figures or Jews from those of the New Testament. Those of the Old Testament are shown “typically in Oriental dress.”<sup>71</sup>

Rembrandt repeats this figure in other works. There is a turbaned male figure reading from the scriptures in the forefront of Rembrandt’s painting, *The Repentant Judas Returning the Thirty Pieces of Silver to the High Priests and Elders* (1629, Mulgrave Castle, Yorkshire). There are several examples within his etched work in which Rembrandt shows figures similar to that of the ‘High Priest’ in his *Death of the Virgin*. His *Christ Driving the Money-Changers from the Temple* (1635) has a similar figure with a similar staff in the background (fig.199). There is the High Priest with his skeptron in the background in *The Circumcision: the small plate* (c.1630) (fig.200) and again in *The Presentation in the Dark Manner* (1654) (fig.201). The tall skeptron in association with the turban appears to be an identifying motif for the High Priest in Rembrandt’s representations of Temple scenes.<sup>72</sup> Rembrandt, claims Zell, “often structured his New Testament themes on the opposing forms of piety in Judaism and Christianity, rendering the Christian event as Judaism’s fulfilment and annulment.”<sup>73</sup>

The scene shows a ceremony interrupted. Everyone waits. Jewish ritual does not require a ‘deathbed confession’; however, it is usual among traditionally observant

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<sup>68</sup> Michael Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 121.

<sup>69</sup> Zell, 121.

<sup>70</sup> Bernier, “The Economy of Salvation”, 184.

<sup>71</sup> De Winkel, *Fashion and Fancy*, 252.

<sup>72</sup> The skeptron in Homer is the attribute of the king, of heralds, messengers, judges, all who are invested with authority. The skeptron is passed to the orator before he speaks so he can speak with authority. See Mervyn Duffy, *How Language, Ritual and Sacraments Work* (Roma: Editrice Pontificia, 2005), 166.

<sup>73</sup> Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt*, 2.

Jews, to recite the *vidui*, a confessional prayer, when close to death.<sup>74</sup> Nor are these “the final ceremonial prayers of a Requiem Mass” as Bernier describes it.<sup>75</sup> This group of three participants in a seemingly quasi-Jewish liturgy are joined by a curious onlooker who does not appear to be noted in the literature. An elderly man leans forward, peering between those in front in order to better observe the scene before him. He is gaunt, thin-lipped, heavy-eyed and hook-nosed. His demeanour is bent, sharp and inquisitive. He is rubbing his hands together and he wears a skull-cap (fig.202). Rembrandt pictures such an onlooker among the condemnatory crowd in his oil-sketch *Ecce Homo* (1634) (fig.203). Nadler suggests that Rembrandt was not above using caricatures of Jewish figures in order to make a polemical religious point.<sup>76</sup> Behind the group, Rembrandt shows a man who has turned his back on the scene.

Askew suggests a reason which could account for Rembrandt’s inclusion of this man seen leaving the room. She states that owing to the redemptive nature of Christ’s sacrifice and her own part in that story, Mary is known as the Door to Paradise (*porta paradisi*).<sup>77</sup> The Virgin as the door through which Christ entered the world is a common motif in *transitus* art. Such an allusion is shown in Dürer’s *Death of the Virgin*, where a door opens out from the side wall; it appears again in Crabeth’s sketch for his window. Rembrandt implies such a presence. There is the space to the left behind the bed through which the figure of a man is disappearing and the partly-drawn curtain through which another man emerges to the lower right. There is a metaphoric departing of the man to the left who turns his back on the world of Jewish practice and belief and walks into the light which leaves his shadow cast on the wall behind him (fig.204). To the right a figure of a man emerges through the curtain into the new Christian world initiated by the Virgin Mary’s acceptance of the angel’s invitation (fig.205).

The soaring wall on the left behind the group of figures suggests temple architecture. An upper gallery is shown and a shape which suggests a veiled woman, or a woman with her back to the viewer. This would represent the place women take within the synagogue. Women are separated from men by a curtain, a wall or, most

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<sup>74</sup> See Michael J. Broyde, ed. *Marriage, Sex and Family in Judaism* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005); and Rochelle E. Millen, *Women, Birth and Death in Jewish Law and Practice* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 2004).

<sup>75</sup> Bernier, *The Economy of Salvation*, 184.

<sup>76</sup> Nadler, *Rembrandt’s Jews*, 64.

<sup>77</sup> Askew, *Caravaggio’s Death of the Virgin*, 131.

often, they are placed in a second floor gallery.<sup>78</sup> The object which hangs below the drape falling from the balcony could be interpreted as a mirror turned to face the wall, as is required when a death takes place within a Jewish setting (fig.206).

Rembrandt's concern to acknowledge Mary's humanity within a Jewish world is strengthened by his reference to another Jewish ritual. He etches in an empty chair which is an important motif in Jewish culture and ritual, at the bottom right of the picture. There is an empty chair left for the prophet Elijah when a circumcision takes place. A low empty chair is also present at the place of a death (fig.207). The ceremony of *Shiva*, seven days of ritual mourning which follow a burial, demands that all present sit on low chairs; often a chair is left empty.<sup>79</sup>

The small scene at the right hand corner is again composed of a group of five which this time includes three women (fig.208). This group is similar to gatherings of bystanders or listeners seen in Rembrandt's representations of Christ preaching (fig.209). The difference is in the demeanour. Two of the women, their backs to the viewer, appear to be conversing, hands held out as if to warm them and seemingly indifferent to the event taking place. A third woman is deeply grieved, her head resting on her hand and a handkerchief held to her eyes.<sup>80</sup> Crouching beside her is the figure of a man of sinister appearance (fig.210).

This crouching figure could be recognised as a figure of evil. In *The Golden Legend*, Mary addresses the visiting angel, requesting that her sons and brothers, the apostles, be brought together that she could see them again before she died.<sup>81</sup> This is followed by another request: "And I also plead and pray that when my soul leaves this body, it may see no foul spirit, and no power of Satan may confront me."<sup>82</sup> Rembrandt pictures that foul spirit lurking in the background but unseen by the Virgin. The notion of repulsive and frightening demons waiting to detain the soul and

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<sup>78</sup> Nadler quotes a description of a Jewish synagogue in Amsterdam written by an English traveller in 1641. The traveller describes the women as being secluded from men in galleries by themselves with their heads "mabbl'd with linen after a fantastical fashion". This description could apply to the distinctive shape seen in the upper gallery in Rembrandt's etching. See E. S. de Beer, ed. *The Diary of John Evelyn*, Vol. II, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1955), 42 quoted in Nadler, *Rembrandt's Jews*, 168.

<sup>79</sup> Samuel C. Heilman, *When a Jew Dies* (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 2001), 133.

<sup>80</sup> The handkerchief places her within contemporary Amsterdam. It was a typically Dutch accessory; a handkerchief with *akers* (acorns or tassels on the corners) is a type described by de Winkel as a reference to "mastery of emotions and religious consolation for bereavement" (de Winkel, 79).

<sup>81</sup> *The Golden Legend*, Vol. II, 78.

<sup>82</sup> *The Golden Legend*, Vol. II, 78.



drag it off to hell appeared early in Christian literature.<sup>83</sup> Here Rembrandt recalls *Ars Moriendi* literature and stories of a final assault by the devil in the last moments of life. There is a sense that this dark figure is a negative counterpart to the triumphant brightness of the central angel. The dense dark etching, the figures with their backs to the light represent indifference, despair and evil and act as a visual foil to the light, unfolding joy of heavenly welcome. The theology of the eschaton describes divine light as the ‘place’ where God’s energy is present.<sup>84</sup> Sinful space, on the other hand, is entirely different. It is devoid of light, dark, confining and filled with fear.<sup>85</sup>

The fifth member of the group is the standing figure who peers at the scene through an opening in the curtain. Bernier suggests this figure might be Rembrandt himself, a witness to the miracle catching himself in the act of observing.<sup>86</sup> More likely is Askew’s suggestion, which I take here, that the figure is that of Thomas the apostle.<sup>87</sup> Again *The Golden Legend* outlines a story, which the writer himself admits to being apocryphal, but which has become part of the iconography surrounding Mary’s death: “that Thomas was not present at the death of the Virgin and doubted when he came.”<sup>88</sup> Imitating the story of Christ’s death and resurrection, the apostle Thomas arrived and did not believe that the Virgin’s body had been assumed into heaven; miraculously, as proof of her assumption Thomas receives her girdle from heaven.<sup>89</sup> Emerging into the scene, Rembrandt’s ‘Thomas’ is lit by a shaft of light; the scene is ‘revealed’ to him and that revelation is acknowledged. The inclusion of the apostle Thomas is not unusual in dormition iconography. Lola Gellman notes that Petrus Christus (c.1420-1476) was the first Flemish artist to include this “iconographic novelty” in a panel painting in the central panel of his altarpiece, the *Death of the Virgin* (c.1460-65, Timken Museum of Art, San Diego).<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> The idea that the power of evil, the devil “is prowling around like a roaring lion looking for someone to eat” is found in the Gospel writings (1 Peter 5: 8). The devil is an ever-present threat demanding constant vigilance on the part of the faithful. Brian Daley states that The Gnostic *First Apocalypse of James* depicts the severity of God’s judgement and the sufferings of the damned. Desert monastic literature used such threats. A homily attributed to the fifth-century writer Cyril of Alexandria talks of the “cruel, merciless, untameable demons, as dark as Ethiopians, who circle around” (Daley, “At the Hour of Our Death”, 76).

<sup>84</sup> Constas, “To Sleep Perchance to Dream”, 114.

<sup>85</sup> Constas, 116.

<sup>86</sup> Bernier, *The Economy of Salvation*, 195.

<sup>87</sup> Askew, *Caravaggio’s Death of the Virgin*, 30, 126-127.

<sup>88</sup> *The Golden Legend* Vol. II, 82.

<sup>89</sup> *The Golden Legend* Vol. II, 126.

<sup>90</sup> Lola B. Gellman, “The ‘Death of the Virgin’ by Petrus Christus: An Altar-piece Reconstructed”, *The Burlington Magazine* 112.804 (1970): 148.

There is another sub-scene which takes place at the end of the bed. A grief-stricken woman her hands clasped in prayer appears to lean for support against the curved post of the canopied bed. Behind her is the figure of a man bathed in light, his hands outstretched; before him sits a woman in deep prayer (fig.211). Bernier identifies the male figure as “more than an apostle, a choric figure” who reveals both the scene and his own grief, inviting the same response in the viewer.<sup>91</sup> Later he suggests that this figure might represent Christ himself, the fall of the curtain behind, he says, indicates a mandorla which encloses the figure and thus glorifies him. He sees this scene as indicative of stories that tell of Christ being present at the death of his mother. His pose, Bernier states, recalls the crucifixion but also Rembrandt’s depictions of Christ as preacher.<sup>92</sup>

*The Golden Legend*, however, places John in that central position. He arrives first at the bedside of the Virgin and Mary reminds him of his place: “My son John, remember your master’s words with which he commended me to you as your mother and you to me to be my son.”<sup>93</sup> It is John who welcomes the remainder of the apostles miraculously brought to the bedside of the Virgin. Iconographical tradition pictures John either as an old man or a beardless aesthetic youth.<sup>94</sup> This figure is young and beardless; Rembrandt invariably identifies his Christ-figure with a beard. Here he is using a typology, a generic way of picturing the apostle John.<sup>95</sup> Cranach, for example, paints the Apostle John similarly in his Crucifixion scenes. There is a similarity between the two figures of Mary and John at the foot of the cross and Rembrandt’s two figures at the foot of Mary’s death-bed in Cranach’s *The Crucifixion* (1503) (fig.212). Iconographical tradition also places either Peter or John at the head or foot

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<sup>91</sup> Bernier, 195. This hypothesis is also accepted by Auerbach who bases her identification on the brightness of the figure in relation to that of the Virgin seeing in it a reference to a verse from the Bible where Christ identifies himself: “I am the light of the world”, He said. “He who follows me can never walk in darkness; he will possess the light which is life” (John 8: 12). The position of the figure silhouetted against the curtain she suggests might refer to Christ as the Door to Paradise, the *Porta Paradisi*. Again, according to Auerbach, the curtains themselves may intimate the incarnation with its prefiguration of Mary’s assumption. See Auerbach, “Taking Mary’s Pulse”, 97.

<sup>92</sup> Bernier, “The Economy of Salvation”, 195.

<sup>93</sup> *The Golden Legend* Vol. II, 78.

<sup>94</sup> Cartlidge and Elliott, *Art and the Apocrypha*, 173. Christian Tümpel also states that in the pictorial tradition John the evangelist is always shown as a young man. See Tümpel “Traditional and Groundbreaking: Rembrandt’s Iconography”, in Ernst van der Wetering, ed. *Rembrandt: Quest of a Genius* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2006), 135.

<sup>95</sup> Schapelhouman also suggests an identification of this figure as St. John the Evangelist. She bases her assumption on a similarity found in a Lucas van Leyden engraving, *The Adoration of the Magi* (1513) where one of the Magi is pictured in such a pose. See Hinterding, Luijen and Royalton-Kisch, eds. *Rembrandt the Printmaker*, 164.

of the bed.<sup>96</sup> Rembrandt has placed John the beloved disciple at the foot of Mary's bed, together with the two Marys with whom he shared the vigil at the foot of the cross – Mary of Magdala who leans against the bedpost and Mary the mother of James, Joset and Salome (Mark 15:41) who sits at John's side.

Rembrandt's inclusion of women in this scene is not without precedent. Knipping points out that the presence of women around the Virgin's deathbed is simply a continuation of the three women shown at Christ's grave. He notes the work of Dieric Bouts (c.1450-1540) and Maerten de Vos (1580) who, in their separate visualizations of the theme, show women at the Virgin's bier.<sup>97</sup> In her review of the iconography of Caravaggio's *Death of the Virgin*, Askew identifies the mourner sitting beside the bier on which Mary's body lies as Mary Magdalene.<sup>98</sup> One writer, she says, St. Cyril of Jerusalem in his *Discourse on Mary Theotokos*, describes Mary Magdalene as being present at the deathbed of the Virgin.<sup>99</sup>

Brom alone appears to identify this standing female figure as Mary Magdalene, who "clutches the bedpost imploringly" (fig.213).<sup>100</sup> Although there is nothing which could directly identify Rembrandt's mourning woman at the foot of the bed as Mary Magdalene, seen in relation to the figure of St. John with whom she shared the vigil at the foot of the cross, it makes such a reading probable. She is pictured not with her stock attribute, a jar of ointment, but as the tearful penitent. The Magdalene as a reformed sinner is, according to Askew, the exemplar of sinning humanity redeemed through forgiveness and the love of Christ.<sup>101</sup> As the only figure shown full-length, Rembrandt emphasises her importance.

Spatially the central scene is defined by the presence of these two standing figures at diagonal corners of the bed: the High Priest as representative of the hierarchical Jewish church and the Magdalene as representative of sinful humanity and ultimate mercy. The dying virgin effectively mediates the space between judgement and forgiveness.

The bed on which Mary lies is in itself a theological setting. Askew notes the reference to Mary as the 'temple built without hands' (Acts 7: 48, 17: 24).<sup>102</sup> *The*

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<sup>96</sup> Askew, *Caravaggio's Death of the Virgin*, 29.

<sup>97</sup> Knipping, *Heaven on Earth*, 254

<sup>98</sup> Askew, *Caravaggio's Death of the Virgin*, 84.

<sup>99</sup> Askew, *Caravaggio's Death of the Virgin*, 31.

<sup>100</sup> Brom, *Dood van Maria*, 115.

<sup>101</sup> Askew, *Caravaggio's Death of the Virgin*, 87.

<sup>102</sup> Askew, 119.

*Golden Legend* again supplies a visual association. As the body of Mary is being carried away for burial the High Priest speaks the words: “Look at the tabernacle of that man who disturbed us and our people so much. Look at the glory that is now paid to that woman.”<sup>103</sup> The canopied bed itself derives its form and structure from the tabernacle used to house the consecrated elements of the Eucharist. Both Dürer and Schongauer use such imagery. Rembrandt’s bed suggests again, the baldacchino which stands over the altar in churches, reminiscent of the tent of the Old Testament which protects the Holy of Holies. In this case the baldachin/canopy encloses the physical body of the Virgin Mary.<sup>104</sup>

Contemporary furniture offers inspiration for these large enclosed beds. Rembrandt, at the same time as he was making this engraving, was drawing his sick wife Saskia in a similar bed (fig.214) and it seems likely that the presence of his sick wife in the house as he made this etching may even have attracted his attention to the subject.<sup>105</sup> Here, too, an empty chair is shown beside the bed.

As Rembrandt’s Virgin lies on the bed, her head falls to one side, her arms lie limply, her head is covered with a cap. The apostle Peter, recognised by his tousled beard and bald head, tenderly raises her head on the ruffled pillow and wipes her mouth with a cloth.<sup>106</sup> A standing man takes her pulse, as if verifying that she is still alive or in fact has just died. The presence of a ‘doctor figure’ taking the Virgin’s pulse hints at her humanity.<sup>107</sup> The figure, shown in this context, could be identified as St. Luke.

Several motifs point to such an identification. Luke was a medical man; he wrote the most complete version we have of Mary’s life in his Gospel and he holds a scroll in his hand which could indicate this. He was also deemed to be an artist, since he was

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<sup>103</sup> *The Golden Legend* Vol. II, 81.

<sup>104</sup> Eberlein notes the curtained bed as an element of Marian iconography. The *cortina* (curtain) motif evolved from an early motif denoting the presence of the ruler, to one which referenced the virgin motherhood of Mary. He describes comparisons between Mary and the Ark of the Covenant as among the most numerous epithets and symbols in Marian iconography up to the end of the fifteenth century. Eberlein, “The Curtain in Raphael’s Sistine Madonna”, 68.

<sup>105</sup> White, *Rembrandt as an Etcher*, 44.

<sup>106</sup> Peter and Paul are identified by their unmistakable facial features. Paul is narrow-faced with receding hairline and pointed beard, Peter is stocky, broad-faced with short curly hair and a shorter rounded beard. See Cartlidge and Elliott, *Art and the Apocrypha*, 134.

<sup>107</sup> Auerbach sees the figure of the doctor as defining tensions in Early Modernity when the prestige of doctors and medicine superseded religious dogma and superstition in the seventeenth century. She regards Rembrandt’s prominent placing of the doctor as signalling his approach to the subject from scientifically and philosophically enlightened point of view rather than from one of religious perspective. See Auerbach, 100.

acknowledged as the one who knew the Virgin best.<sup>108</sup> There is a visual history of representations of St. Luke painting the first picture of the Virgin.<sup>109</sup> It would seem appropriate for the artist Rembrandt to have honoured Luke the artist in this role.

As important as the bed itself is the curtained frame which encloses it. The curtained bed provides Rembrandt with a motif used in liturgical architecture since the Middle Ages.<sup>110</sup> The curtain surrounding the altar and suspended on a metal rod was pulled back at the climax of the Mass to reveal the body and blood of Christ miraculously transformed into the Eucharist. It features, according to Martha Hollander, as an “instrument of divine revelation.”<sup>111</sup> Rembrandt’s curtain on the left side is tucked back behind the bolster to ‘reveal’ the dying Virgin. The curtain at the foot of the bed is thrown up onto the frame where it falls in layered folds. This treatment of the curtain is found in Caravaggio’s *Death of the Virgin*, where the heavy red drape which occupies the top third of the picture is, Askew suggests, an explicit reference to the Virgin’s womb. It alludes to the body as fabric from which Christ was materially fashioned.<sup>112</sup>

The curtain pulled back to the right side of the Virgin’s bed is revelatory in a much more luminous sense. A swirling mass of light and cloud carries the presence of angels directly into the Virgin’s space. The curtain flutters, the canopy fills. There is a sense that the entire central scene has been destabilised by the heavenly eruption, tilted to the right. Both the bed and the heavy beamed background list like a boat in heavy seas. The Virgin is immersed in light.

Rembrandt’s etching does not show with any clarity whether the Virgin is dead or in the act of dying. From the expressions on the faces of the surrounding crowd, it could be either. The group at the foot of the bed, the Magdalene, St. John and probably the other Mary, show signs of deep grief as if death has already occurred;

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<sup>108</sup> According to Geri Parlby, “One story that purports to explain the origin of Marian art has been remarkably persistent, the story of the multi-talented St. Luke. Although details vary with the telling, the basic story goes that after the crucifixion Mary went to live with the beloved disciple John. There she met Luke and knowing he was an artist asked him to paint a portrait of her with Jesus as a young child... While being painted Mary is said to have told Luke the stories of Jesus’ life that he later incorporated into his Gospels”. See Parlby, “The Origins of Marian Art: The Evolution of Marian Imagery in the Western Church until AD 431”, in Sarah Jane Boss, ed. *Mary the Complete Resource*. London: Continuum, 2007. 106.

<sup>109</sup> See for example Rogier Van de Weyden, *St Luke Drawing a Portrait of the Virgin* (c.1435, Kunsthistorisch Museum, Vienna), Jan Gossaert, *St Luke Painting the Virgin* (1520, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) and Maerten van Heemskerck, *St Luke Painting the Virgin* (1532, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rennes, France).

<sup>110</sup> Martha Hollander, *Entrance for the Eyes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 69.

<sup>111</sup> Hollander, 69.

<sup>112</sup> Askew, *Caravaggio’s Death of the Virgin*, 116-117.

those around her bed, St. Peter at her head and the doctor (possibly Luke) taking her pulse suggest that these are the last moments of her life. The stilled moment when the reader has paused and the High Priest waits, suggests that the moment is near or maybe has just happened.

There is a state of the soul in the immediate post-mortem phase which is understood as “liminal, (an) intermediate phase between death and resurrection”.<sup>113</sup> It is, as Conostas says, often a phase of “self-discovery or of being self-discovered”.<sup>114</sup> The space was immortalized in the story of the death of Christ. The three days between death and resurrection, textually and iconographically filled with journeys to the underworld, to Hades or to Limbo “assumed the status of deeply held theological convictions.”<sup>115</sup> Generally speaking, “the exemplary death of Christ established a fundamental law of human existence, namely a temporary residence in an interim state until the general resurrection of the dead.”<sup>116</sup> Mary was exempted from this delay. The souls of the sinless, of whom Mary through her Immaculate Conception was the peerless member, proceeded more or less directly to heaven.<sup>117</sup>

So on what errand was the heavenly crowd embarked? Bernier identifies the full-length draped figure of the angel surrounded by little angels as the archangel who arrives to announce the coming of death to the Virgin.<sup>118</sup> The story, told in *The Golden Legend* reads: “an angel came to her in the midst of a great light and greeted her ... three days hence thou shalt be called forth from the body, because thy Son awaits thee ...”<sup>119</sup> There is a chronological discrepancy here, for these words from the angel to the Virgin are spoken *before* she requests the presence of her apostles and *before* she makes preparations for her death: she had been given three days to accomplish this task. Such an annunciation would not take place on her deathbed.

The announcing angel, arms spread in benediction, is a psychopomp – a conductor of souls to the after-world – in this case to heaven (fig.215). The angel emerges from the brilliant depths surrounded by clouds and accompanied by a vortex of wind which can be seen in the directional lines and the billowing bed curtains. There is a very real sense of movement downwards and into the bed space. What has not been noticed by

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<sup>113</sup> Conostas, “To Sleep Perchance to Dream”, 91.

<sup>114</sup> Conostas, 91.

<sup>115</sup> Conostas, 93.

<sup>116</sup> Conostas, 103.

<sup>117</sup> Conostas, 109.

<sup>118</sup> Bernier, “The Economy of Salvation”, 181.

<sup>119</sup> *The Golden Legend* Vol. II, 78.

Bernier or by any other commentator to my knowledge, is the small angel at the announcing angel's feet (fig.216). This strange creature reaches out towards the body of the Virgin below. Rembrandt has given it a halo and wings. He has also given it a ring of radiance, a defined outer halo which he has not given to any of the other angels. In this way Rembrandt indicates the importance of this particular heavenly being. This appears to be the soul of the Virgin. This is not a dormition, it is a transitus. The Virgin is already dead and her soul, separated from her body, awaits reunion. If this is so, then clearly this scene anticipates the assumption of her body into heaven.

## Conclusion

The atmosphere of this scene is captured by Rembrandt's use of the etching technique. He conveys an extraordinary breadth of theological, historical and personal information. The lower register, the human part of the story is meticulously detailed; the expressions on the faces carefully articulate various degrees of concern and grief. The proportions, the intensity of the *chiaroscuro*, the placement of characters and their relationship to each other determine the way the scene is read.

The heavenly sphere is defined by a change in technique. The fine swirling lines, the light cross-hatching and the soft shadows indicate that other world. So do the angels. The angels are drawn almost crudely; they are, in fact, ugly creatures, sketchily-etched, luminous to the point of transparency. The technique seems tentative, as if Rembrandt himself is unsure whether he can allow himself to venture into this heavenly space.

It is in describing that heavenly space that Rembrandt comes closest to the work of Callot who had, before Rembrandt, defined this other world. His heaven pours beams of light through lightly-drawn clouds. His clouds are populated by angels but, in place of Rembrandt's commanding angel, Callot has placed Christ himself coming, with sceptre in hand, to welcome the soul of his mother (fig.217).

Rembrandt highlights his characters and identifies their importance through his use of light. The Jewish world is suggested by the *chiaroscuro*, the sense of darkness in the foreground. The dark table and chair define the lower parameters of the scene. The light plays on the back of the reader but illuminates the text from which he reads. It illuminates the beloved disciple John and the faces of those gathered around the

bed. The darkened back of the man leaving to the left of the picture can be seen moving from darkness to light; his shape is illuminated and his shadow falls on the wall behind. His counterpart on the other side, 'Thomas', is lit by a posterior light but the light of revelation plays on his face. Light pours from the heavens. The Virgin, bathed in this light, is so finely yet carefully etched that she appears to be in the process of becoming absorbed into the light itself. She is at the same time part of the earthly scene and becoming part of the other.

Rembrandt inhabits his text in a way that is seldom seen in art. The series of episodes which this etching encloses spell out Mary's history – the history of her past as a faithful Jew, of her present as the human mother dying and as the first of the new Christians. He anticipates the reward for her sacrifice, the translation of her body from this world to the next. Woven into the story are the personal elements of a familiarity with biblical text, knowledge of the artistic tradition and the sober familiarity of the bed-side scene of his sick wife.

Rembrandt both acknowledges and defies convention. Although there is reference to the works of Schongauer, Dürer and Crabeth in his etching *Death of the Virgin*, it remains largely superficial. It is Callot's *Death of the Virgin* which illuminates a *transitus*, a heavenly delegation coming to receive the soul of the Virgin in much the same way as Rembrandt was later to formulate his scene. As has been noted, there is ample evidence that Rembrandt was familiar with at least some sections of Callot's work; whether he knew of this particular series of works describing the life of the Virgin is not recorded.

Despite a general agreement that this print was made for a Catholic audience, what concentrated analysis has been made (Brom, Bernier, Perlove and Silver) has sought to shift the focus to a Protestant understanding. Auerbach states that this print "cannot be considered Catholic in its iconography" nor, she says, does it fit with a Protestant paradigm, for certain figures would have been abhorred for their association with Catholic ritual.<sup>120</sup> The subject, however, subsumes doctrines which lie within the Catholic tradition and which were explicitly rejected by Luther and the Reformers. Rembrandt returned to an all but forgotten theme in a way which acknowledged contemporary theological dispute. Mary's Immaculate Conception is made implicit in a scene which shows not only the Virgin's death but the translation of her soul from

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<sup>120</sup> See Auerbach, "Taking Mary's Pulse", 99.



this world to the next. To fail to acknowledge Rembrandt's understanding of Catholic doctrine and tradition in his *Death of the Virgin* is to miss both its structure and its purpose.

## *Virgin and Child in the Clouds, 1641*

### Introduction

Two years after the large etching *Death of the Virgin* was made, Rembrandt returned to a small-scale format and made a simple work, *Virgin and Child in the Clouds* (1641) (fig.218). This etching appears to ask none of the great theological questions which are embodied in his *Death of the Virgin*, for it presumes on the answer, that Mary is in heaven with her son. Yet the seemingly uncomplicated iconography of this work colludes with and confronts almost all representations of the Virgin Mary in art and most Mariological discourse is implicated in some way. The Virgin is, at the same time, the Queen of Heaven, the Mother of God, the Virgin of Humility and the *Mater Dolorosa*. Rembrandt's *Virgin and Child in the Clouds* is a conflation of theological ideas and a composite of various iconographic inspirations.

This image has, as with the *Holy Family* (1635), again been studied as a derivative of a particular form of Marian iconography, that of the Madonna of Humility. Formal iconographic analysis has been made in terms of Rembrandt's appeal to a Baroque style, and in comparison to a particular work, an etching made by Federico Barocci, *Madonna in the Clouds* (c.1582), from which he is said to have drawn his inspiration.<sup>1</sup> More recent critics note also that it is a 'Catholic' subject.<sup>2</sup> They concentrate, however, on the aberration for which this work is noted, the presence of a *pentimento* in the form of a disengaged head of a woman which Rembrandt has etched upside down on the Virgin's knee.<sup>3</sup> Little attention has been paid to the iconographic possibilities of the image itself.

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<sup>1</sup> See Visser 't Hooft, 44; Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book*, 31; Williams, *Rembrandt's Women*, 173.

<sup>2</sup> The 'Catholic' nature of the subject, for example, is noted by Gary Schwartz, *The Complete Etchings of Rembrandt*, B 61; Eva Ornstein-Van Slooten, Marijke Holtrop, *The Rembrandt House: a catalogue of Rembrandt etchings*, (Zwolle: Waanders, 2008): 47; Perlove and Silver, 50. The recognition of any religious bias of such subjects appears to be a relatively modern phenomenon probably given greater importance as a result of an emerging interest in Rembrandt's religious beliefs and their possible effects on his work which began in the late twentieth century. Earlier catalogues such as those of White and Boon, *Rembrandt's Etchings*, (Amsterdam: Van Gendt and Co, 1969) and Hind (1967) note only the name of the work and the various states in which it was produced.

<sup>3</sup> One of the earliest compilations of Rembrandt's etchings made by Edme-François Gersaint in 1752 mentions this pictorial aberration: "in front of her left knee the head of a child reversed which has been left on the copper before Rembrandt began this subject or was introduced by him as a puzzle for the connoisseur", Edme-François Gersaint, *Catalogue and Description of Etchings of Rembrandt van-Rhyn with some Account of his Life*, (London: T Jeffreys, 1752): 40. A representative description is given by Hind (*A Catalogue of Rembrandt's Etchings*, 90), who describes the presence of the upside down head on the Virgin's knee. He also draws attention to a further state which includes another lightly etched

The absence of any biblical sanction for the etching undermines an appeal to Protestant acceptability as a 'history' subject. The subject remains within a Catholic tradition. Perlove and Silver note the importance of this etching in devotional imagery that acknowledges Mary's Immaculate Conception, her Assumption, and her place as Queen of Heaven.<sup>4</sup> Any appeal to a wider Protestant public would appear to lie only as a further representation of Rembrandt's particular skills as an etcher.

Of all Rembrandt's works, *Virgin and Child in the Clouds* would seem to identify Mary's role most clearly as 'mediatrix', the one through whom divine favour could be both sought and received.<sup>5</sup> It is this particularly Catholic belief in the intercessory powers of the Virgin Mary that the Reformers could not accept. Luther, and after him, Calvin, was adamant about the undesirability of any mediation through the Virgin or the Saints. In the Augsburg Confession of 1530 (the primary confession of faith for the Lutheran Church), Article XXI "Concerning the Cult of the Saints", states: "For it cannot be demonstrated in scripture that a person should call upon the saints or seek help from them. For there is only one single reconciler and mediator set up between God and humanity, Jesus Christ... he alone promised to hear our prayers."<sup>6</sup> There is a suspicion, however, that popular piety did not die as easily as public confessional identity. This image might still have appealed to a more covert piety which, recognising Mary's own humanity, anticipated that she, as a human mother, could translate the needs of those who appealed through her to the son to whom she had given birth.<sup>7</sup>

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head just above and to the right of the original *pentimento*. The only known impression of this second state is held in the British Museum (Craddock and Barnard, Cat 10, No. 135a); this etched head is now thought to be a later addition or a forgery (Hind, 90).

<sup>4</sup> Perlove and Silver, *Rembrandt's Faith*, 50. On this point see also Gilboa *Images of the Feminine*, 59.

<sup>5</sup> Some evidence of the intercessory powers of the Virgin is evidenced in the biblical text. The first act of Christ's public ministry took place at the wedding feast of Cana. Here the Virgin, noticing a potentially embarrassing situation – that the hosts were about to run out of wine – appealed to her son for help. While chastising her for pre-empting the introduction of his public life, Christ did as she asked and turned water into wine, (John 2: 3-5). Marina Warner notes that in Mariological teaching Mary's intervention in this miraculous event both illustrates her piety and compassion and reveals the efficiency of her intercession with Christ. See Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 16.

<sup>6</sup> Lund, ed. *Documents from the History of Lutheranism 1517-1750*, 65.

<sup>7</sup> On the subject of domestic piety, see in particular Benjamin J. Kaplan, 'Fictions of Privacy: House Chapels and the Spatial Accommodation of Religious Dissent in Early Modern Europe', *The American Historical Review*, 107.4 (2002): 1-32. Eamon Duffy (talking about religious sensibilities in late medieval England) states that despite the diversity of religious opinions, there was a remarkable homogeneity across the social spectrum based on shared symbols, prayers, feasts and observances which bound communities together. The rhythms of the liturgy were the rhythms of life itself. These rhythms of life did not die as easily as confessional identities. Across Europe various types of devotion became rooted deeply into the psyche of the people and remnants of past observances, most notably scenes from the passion and death of Christ, were revived to ameliorate or even make sense of common

## A history of the image

While Rembrandt's *Virgin and Child in the Cloud* engages with generic representations of Mary as the Madonna of Humility, it represents also, a history of interconnecting images from which it is derived – images such as *Maria Lactans* (the nursing mother) and the Virgin at the foot of the cross, the *Mater Dolorosa*. Both these subjects, which again have long iconographic histories dating back to the early days of the church, focus on the intimate relationship between the mother and her child; in the case of the *Mater Dolorosa* it is obviously the relationship with the mother and her grown child.

A study of the 'Madonna of Humility' by Millard Meiss finds that the image of the Virgin shown in a lowly posture seated either on the ground or on a low seat did not evolve into a recognised visual form until the mid-fourteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Meiss traces the theme to its earliest dated example. It was, he observes, initiated by Simone Martini (1285-1344) in a seminal work (now lost) painted in Naples c.1317, from whence the representation was rapidly emulated by painters in Naples, Bologna and Pisa.<sup>9</sup> A cluster of such works attributed to local painters suggests that the composition originated in the Marches, but according to Meiss, they followed a Tuscan style.<sup>10</sup> A painting of the Virgin after the style of Simone Martini (c.1285-1344) (fig.219) found in the Museo Nazionale, Palermo, and dated 1346, shows the Virgin with child, seated on the ground. The infant draws her breast into his mouth at the same time as he turns his head from her and looks out towards the viewer; it is accompanied by the Latin inscription *Nostra Domina de Humilitate* (Our Lady of Humility).<sup>11</sup> Later examples show the Virgin, not only seated on the ground with the child in her arms but also surrounded by the sun, moon and stars, which link her visually to the Woman of the Apocalypse. Meiss notes that there are early examples without such symbolism, representations of the Virgin alone which bear the inscription: *Humilitatem. Ancillae Sue. Ecce. Ex. Hoc. B...* "He has looked upon his

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disasters, above all, the successive waves of the plague. See Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 2-8, 52.

<sup>8</sup> Millard Meiss, "The Madonna of Humility", *The Art Bulletin* 18:4 (Dec. 1936) 435-465, 435.

<sup>9</sup> Meiss, 437-8.

<sup>10</sup> Meiss, 441.

<sup>11</sup> Meiss, 435.

lowly handmaid” (Luke 1:48). He concludes from this that the humility of the Virgin, as expressed in art, relies solely on the fact that she is seated on the ground.<sup>12</sup>

These early compositions were not based on new theological precepts but reflected contemporary forms of devotion directed towards a more personal approach to piety and meditation.<sup>13</sup> If the Virgin is not shown actually feeding her child, a gestural indication is given that that is her purpose. She is shown with either her own hand or that of the child seated on her lap, indicating her breast. This image of the Virgin of Humility was intimately tied to ideas of charity and concern for all sinners. The style further evolved in the fourteenth century to show the Virgin no longer seated on the ground, but placed, still seated, high above the ground in some remote celestial space. This composition was, as Meiss describes it, ‘naturalised’ by placing the Virgin seated on a bank of clouds.<sup>14</sup> In the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century the French had adopted a ‘garden-type’ Madonna of Humility, where the Virgin sat outside in a garden. It was from this form that the Northern scenes developed in a more naturalistic way.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, the cloud-borne version continued to be reproduced. By the end of the sixteenth century and the early seventeenth century, variations of the Madonna of Humility translated into the Madonna in the Clouds surrounded by *putti*, seen for example in the work of Domenico Tibaldi (1575) (fig.220), were readily available to the public on the open market.<sup>16</sup>

The Madonna of Humility is distinguished from other types of Marian representations by the intimacy it effects. The sacred figures become more natural and act in a more natural way drawing the viewer into a self-recognition which is at the same time emotional and dependant.<sup>17</sup> The image, according to Meiss, became a “devotional image, which sought to establish a direct and sympathetic relationship

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<sup>12</sup> Meiss, 435.

<sup>13</sup> Ilse Hecht, “Madonna of Humility”, *Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago*, 70.6 (1976): 10.

<sup>14</sup> Meiss, “The Madonna of Humility”, 448.

<sup>15</sup> Notably in early works of Robert Campin, Rogier van der Weyden and Jan van Eyck.

<sup>16</sup> See for example the widely copied and disseminated engraving by Agostino Carracci: *Virgin and Child on a Crescent Moon* c.1579, a version of which was also engraved and published, on his own account, by Carracci’s publisher Domenico Tibaldi. See Naoko Takahatake, “Domenico Tibaldi ‘impressore’ publishing Agostino Carracci’s in Bologna”, *The Burlington Magazine* 1272 (2009), 149. See also the widely circulated works of this same subject made by Rembrandt’s Flemish counterparts: Cornelis Schut (c.1612-1655) *Madonna in the Clouds*; Lucas Vorsterman (1639-1666) *Madonna in the Clouds after Parmigianino*; Theodore van Merlen (1609-1661) *Madonna in the Clouds*, 1659. There were also many prints of this same subject disseminated by the printer Schelte Adamsz. Bolswert (1586-1659).

<sup>17</sup> Meiss, “The Madonna of Humility”, 460.

with the viewer.”<sup>18</sup> As such it was linked sensitively and stylistically with representations of the Virgin with her dead son, the *Pietà* or the Man of Sorrows. The rapid diffusion of this type of image throughout Europe had to have been fostered by religious and devotional interests. Meiss singles out the life and ministry of the Dominicans, for it is around their churches that such Madonnas are found.<sup>19</sup>

Georgiana Goddard King takes a different approach. Humility, she says, was a particularly Franciscan virtue, second only to their other great virtue of Poverty. She argues that the early picture by Bartolomeo da Camogli (active 1339-1348) *Nostra Donna de Humilitate* (1346) used by Meiss as an example, shows on the predella beneath the Virgin, a central picture of the instruments of the Passion (fig.221). On either side of this there are groups of kneeling figures of both men and women in various positions of reverence. King points out that some are wearing the habits of the *Disciplinati*, a group motivated by Franciscan piety who modelled themselves on the sufferings of St. Francis.<sup>20</sup>

King traces the image to earlier roots within the Coptic-Arab and later Spanish traditions and she too asks the question, why did the Virgin of Humility suddenly become manifest in particular localities – the Marches of Ancona and the Kingdom of Aragon in the fourteenth century? Her answer lies not with the Dominicans but with the missionary zeal of the Franciscans.<sup>21</sup> Here King associates the imagery with both the *Mater Dolorosa* and Franciscan piety. It was through Franciscan spirituality that a further manifestation of the Virgin of Humility was conceived. The older *Maria Lactans* was given a new mystical significance and the lowly Virgin became the woman of the Apocalypse shown with the now familiar motif of the moon beneath her feet and stars around her head.<sup>22</sup> An early example is found in Lippo di Dalmasio’s (1360-1410) *The Madonna of Humility* (c.1398-1400) (fig.222) which shows the seated Virgin with the child on her knee, angels and stars surrounding her halo and a small crescent moon lying in the grass beside her foot.

Warner also attributes the initial development of this theme to Franciscan spirituality. The Virgin, removed from the heavens and pictured “like a peasant mother with her child sitting cross-legged on the bare earth”, according to Warner,

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<sup>18</sup> Meiss, 452.

<sup>19</sup> Meiss, 451.

<sup>20</sup> Georgiana Goddard King, ‘The Virgin of Humility’, *The Art Bulletin* 17.4 (1935): 474.

<sup>21</sup> King, 477.

<sup>22</sup> King, 486.

evolved in the early 1400s, through the life and preaching of the Franciscan Friars.<sup>23</sup> The Madonna, brought down from her throne and wrapped in home-spun, often with the child at her breast and only the “stars and the moon of the woman of the Apocalypse sometimes about her to identify her divinity”, she says, accommodates a new strain of spiritual intimacy, a closer, simpler, more accessible Virgin.<sup>24</sup>

The importance of this theme in relationship to Rembrandt’s work is found again in Hedquist’s hypothesis that there was a possibility of some interaction between Rembrandt and the large clandestine Franciscan Church of Moses and Aaron, dedicated to St. Anthony of Padua, which was situated on the Breestraat close to Rembrandt’s own residence.<sup>25</sup> Rembrandt’s re-interpretation of this theme, his earlier version of a *Maria Lactans* (c.1635), his later *Virgin with the Instruments of the Passion* (c.1652), his *Mater Dolorosa* (1661) and his general interest in Mary’s position within the Passion narrative, make sense in the light of Franciscan spirituality. If Rembrandt had some contact with the Franciscans, as seems possible in the light of Hedquist’s findings, he could also have knowledge of their particular devotions. A more detailed investigation of Rembrandt’s relationship to the Franciscans remains a subject for future research.

## The critics

Rembrandt’s apparently simple etching *Virgin and Child in the Clouds* (1641) appears again to have attracted little sustained critical evaluation. Stylistic and chronological aspects have been covered in comprehensive studies of his etched *oeuvre* but they remain, for the most part, technical observations. Some art historians observe that it is an obviously ‘Catholic’ scene but, as noted, they concentrate on the aberration of the upside-down head of the woman engraved onto the left knee of the Virgin (fig.223).

Earlier writers, however, did direct attention to the spiritual content of this work. Visser ’t Hooft, writing in 1960, sees this subject as taking up formally “the iconographic theme of the glorification of Mary.” He notes that most of Rembrandt’s representations of the Virgin date from his ‘Baroque’ period (1632-42), a period from which it can be seen that Rembrandt was following the style and subjects of other

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<sup>23</sup> Warner, *Alone of All her Sex*, 182.

<sup>24</sup> Warner, 182.

<sup>25</sup> See Hedquist, *Rembrandt and the Franciscans*, 20-33.

Baroque artists and from which certain motifs for several of his works are derived.<sup>26</sup> He sees this work as influenced by Italian art and derivative of Barocci's *Madonna in the Clouds*, but claims that Rembrandt takes this composition over and transforms it. In Rembrandt's hands, the Virgin becomes a woman of sorrows and he interprets this etching as proof of the "inner tension" in which Rembrandt lived in those years for, in this etching, he finds that "vision and form, intention and expression" are in conflict with each other.<sup>27</sup>

In again allying this work with Rembrandt's 'Baroque period', Kenneth Clark notes that, although Rembrandt used the technical style of the Baroque, he never quite assimilated the imagery. Instead, Rembrandt "exploited the Catholic imagery of the high Baroque with some of its attendant artificialities."<sup>28</sup> Clark sums up his ambivalence over the content when he writes: "If the Virgin had been on the ground all would have been well ... then she could have looked down on her plain pigmy infant." Clark notes also the religious confusion of the times, which he sees as particularly reflected in this etching, but does not expand on this idea; he assesses this work solely on iconographic grounds.<sup>29</sup>

More recent writers have concentrated almost without exception on chronology, style and the aberrant head on the knee, while noting the anomalous nature of such a 'Catholic' subject within Rembrandt's *oeuvre*. Gary Schwartz states it is a Catholic theme "unique in Dutch seventeenth-century art." He suggests that the face on the knee has been interpreted in three ways: as a leftover from an earlier plate, as a reflection of the Virgin's face in the clouds or as a false start for an earlier work where Rembrandt has simply turned the plate around and begun afresh.<sup>30</sup> Williams explains the etched face on the Virgin's knee by suggesting that Rembrandt had begun this plate and decided that "the figure was too small or badly placed and had turned the plate and begun again." She notes also Rembrandt's dependence on Barocci's *Madonna and Child* for his inspiration.<sup>31</sup>

Anat Gilboa turns briefly to the iconography of this work and suggests that although the format of the etching is that of the 'Mother of Humility', the upturned

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<sup>26</sup> Visser 't Hooft, *Rembrandt and the Gospels*, 44.

<sup>27</sup> Visser 't Hooft, 45.

<sup>28</sup> Clark, *Rembrandt and the Italian Renaissance*, 23.

<sup>29</sup> Clark, 24.

<sup>30</sup> Schwartz, *The Complete Etchings of Rembrandt*, B61.

<sup>31</sup> Williams, *Rembrandt's Women*, 173.



eyes and subdued emotion give a sense of premonition.<sup>32</sup> She interprets this print as Assumption imagery since the Virgin is obviously seated in the heavens, but the presence of the child makes such identification unlikely. Her further suggestion that the sentiment of the work reflects the ecstasy found in devotional images of the Virgin as *Maria Regina* appears equally unlikely since the obvious mood of the scene, as she initially suggests, is one of subdued emotion and premonition. She proposes that it was a print made for a Catholic audience and that it combines Catholic imagery with Protestant attitude.<sup>33</sup>

Only Perlove and Silver attempt to place this etching within a Protestant spectrum. They describe the Virgin as “coarse-featured and humble”. Although they accept that such imagery was extremely popular among Catholics, they suggest that it might also have been acceptable to Protestants because the Virgin appears lowly and humble – attributes which were in keeping with Calvin’s belief that the Virgin had no merits of her own but found favour only through God’s grace. A reference to Barocci’s etching as a source and as a comparison is used to strengthen their position. Barocci’s Virgin, they say, is elegant and graceful, befitting her position as Queen of Heaven. Rembrandt’s Virgin, on the other hand, is “stocky and earthy”, her “withdrawn, melancholic mood strikes a counterpoint to the serene and contented child.”<sup>34</sup> The fact that she has no obvious halo emphasises her lowly status. Barocci’s Virgin is ebullient while Rembrandt focuses on her grief – on Simeon’s prophecy in the Temple. In this way, Perlove and Silver suggest, Rembrandt connects a subject which is not biblical to a scriptural episode, something more in keeping with Protestant thought.<sup>35</sup> However a further study of the history of the subject undermines such contentions.

## Seeking a source

The search for a source for this particular etching reaches back into history, not only to the earliest reproductions of the *Maria Lactans* but further still to early Byzantine models of the Virgin and Child known as the *Hodegetria* (Mother of God), or the *Eleousa* (Virgin of Tenderness), which display the intimate relationship of the

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<sup>32</sup> Gilboa, *Images of the Feminine*, 59.

<sup>33</sup> Gilboa, 60.

<sup>34</sup> Perlove and Silver, *Rembrandt’s Faith*, 50.

<sup>35</sup> Perlove and Silver, 51-52.

Virgin with her son.<sup>36</sup> King describes the evolution of the iconography of the Virgin of Humility from these early models. She sees the sentiment evoked as coming closest to that where an intimacy is imposed simply through the feelings the image evokes. There is a common style in the position of the Virgin in such representations. She sits with one knee up and the other down, her garment draped around her in what King describes as an “oriental posture”.<sup>37</sup> Meiss notes that until the thirteenth century the Madonna of Humility usually sat enthroned like a Queen. However, Byzantine art had, for many centuries, placed her sitting on a mattress on the ground in scenes of the Nativity. It is from these early Nativity scenes, according to Meiss, that the Virgin and Child became isolated as an image on its own. It was not until the late *trecento* that Italian artists emotionalized the virtue of Humilty by showing the Virgin sitting on the ground in this typical posture.<sup>38</sup> With a few minor exceptions, this was the way in which Rembrandt positioned the Virgin in both his etchings and his paintings. In this respect Rembrandt remained close to the tradition.

Williams suggests specific sources: Rembrandt was using as inspiration either the title page for Dürer’s etched series *Life of the Virgin* (fig.224), or Barocci’s, *The Madonna in the Clouds* (fig.225).<sup>39</sup> She notes, however, the difference in atmosphere between Barocci’s etching and Rembrandt’s work. She relates the mournful face of his Virgin to earlier etchings that he had made of women begging. Despite the fact that the child sleeps quietly, his position lying in his Mother’s arms, becomes a subtle reference to the Pietà. Mary, she notes, seems to be making a speechless appeal.<sup>40</sup>

Barocci’s *Madonna in the Clouds* has been so closely linked with Rembrandt’s work of the same name that these claims bear a closer examination. Williams, for example, describes Rembrandt’s work as a “free copy after Barocci.”<sup>41</sup> Such a claim

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<sup>36</sup> The *Hodegetria* style icon was said to have been first painted miraculously by St. Luke. The Virgin and child are shown frontally. She carries Christ on her left arm her head slightly inclined towards him and her right hand gesturing in his direction. Christ is usually shown holding a scroll with his right hand raised in blessing. The *Eleousa* type known as the ‘Virgin of Tenderness’ shows the Virgin with the child sitting on one arm his cheek pressed against hers and his arm around her neck. See Hetty J. Roozmond-van Ginhoven, *Ikon: Inspired Art*, (Recklinghausen: Wijenburgh Foundation, 1980): 17, 57.

<sup>37</sup> King, “The Virgin of Humility”, 474.

<sup>38</sup> Meiss, “The Madonna of Humility”, 456.

<sup>39</sup> This information is initially found in Broos, *Index to the Formal Sources of Rembrandt’s Art*, 75-76.

<sup>40</sup> Williams, *Rembrandt’s Women*, 173.

<sup>41</sup> Williams, 173. The British Museum’s database report states that Barocci’s engraving and Rembrandt’s etching are almost the same size and that Rembrandt has “faithfully adopted the uncommon motif of the Virgin Mary’s folded hands”. It also states that it is safe to assume that Rembrandt owned an impression of Barocci’s print. See: The British Museum – Merlin Collections Database P&D Standard Report accessed 05 Sept. 2008.

is easy to advance since it is known that Rembrandt's inventory of 1656 showed that he owned, (entry 195), *een ditto met kopere printen van Vani en anderen als meede Barotius* (one ditto [book] with copper plate etchings by Vanni and others by Barocci).<sup>42</sup> Although Rembrandt is known to have had Barocci's printed works in his possession, there is only a presumption that this particular print was one of them. Schwartz notes that on the back of a drawing *Old Man with a Cloak* (unsigned, undated, before July 1656, Courtauld Institute London), Rembrandt had listed twenty prints in his collection including two by Barocci, an *Annunciation* and a *Monk*.<sup>43</sup> Since Barocci made only four prints, Schwartz hypothesises that Rembrandt's modelling of his *Madonna and Child in the Clouds* on Barocci's print of the same name indicates that he (Rembrandt) was also in possession of a copy of this work. This, I suggest, is by no means certain. Rembrandt's fragmentary list notes several works which include the Virgin: [m]aria van gwydo (Maria by Guido) ...ius (Jesus?) *Christus* [?] *ant taf...stuck* (at table); [j]oseph en marija (Joseph and Mary) *munneken van mutsi ander munnekin*; [ma]ria met d'enghel (Mary with angel); *ovael Maria* (oval Maria); *Lange maria van luit over d...*(oblong Maria).<sup>44</sup> It seems more likely that if Rembrandt had owned the *Virgin and Child in the Clouds*, he would have included it with his list of the two Barocci works he did own and had included. There are also substantial compositional differences, as Perlove and Silver have noted.<sup>45</sup> The Virgin does not sit in the same position; her legs are folded under and not extended as are those of the Virgin in Barocci's work, nor does she hold the child in the same manner. There are no angels and the emotion of the scene is quite different. The background detail moves from joyous ebullience in Barocci's case to Rembrandt's turbulent evocation of a transient state half-way between earth and heaven.

Visser 't Hooft describes Barocci as a "typical representative of Baroque piety", so much so that he "helped fashion the specific outlook of the Counter Reformation."<sup>46</sup> He describes Barocci's Virgin as an "amiable and handsome woman", an "angelic mother."<sup>47</sup> She is just that. She sits on a mound of clouds, serene and beautiful. Her gaze is directed down to her naked male child whose sacredness is not emphasised in any way other than by the fact that his right hand is raised in blessing. She holds him

<sup>42</sup> *Rembrandt Documents*, 369.

<sup>43</sup> Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book*, 138.

<sup>44</sup> See Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book*, 138.

<sup>45</sup> Perlove and Silver, *Rembrandt's Faith*, 50-53.

<sup>46</sup> Visser 't Hooft, *Rembrandt and the Gospel*, 44.

<sup>47</sup> Visser 't Hooft, 44.

on her knee, tying him to her body with laced fingers. Rays emanate from her halo, surrounding her upper body in a circle of light. From either side, *putti* gaze lovingly at her. The Virgin is the centre of attraction, not her son. Her pose, one knee raised with her foot resting on a cloud-step, the other stretched out before her, is typical. We see such poses in the elegant recline of Michelangelo's sibyls on the Sistine ceilings or the lustrous marbles of funerary ornamentations. We see a similar position in one of the many drawings of *Madonna in the Clouds* made by Parmigianino (1503-40) (fig.226), which share this same studied elegance with Vespasiano Strada's (1582-1622) etching *Virgin and Child in the Clouds with Angels* (fig.227).

There is no doubt that Rembrandt turned to the Italian masters for inspiration for his work. Clark examines Rembrandt's debt to Italian art and identifies in this etching, *Virgin and Child in the Clouds*, a posture derived from the antique and repeated by a "sequence of painters from Raphael (fig.228) to Guido Reni (fig.229)", many of whose works were represented in some form in Rembrandt's remarkable collection.<sup>48</sup> Raphael, in particular, was represented in Rembrandt's collection by two paintings, five books of prints and some drawings.<sup>49</sup>

But it was not just to Italian artists that Rembrandt could have turned. Richard Muller-Freienfels points to Albrecht Dürer as a more likely source for inspiration for Rembrandt's etching.<sup>50</sup> He suggests that the "Nordic style" of Dürer and Rembrandt is completely different to that of the Italian masters. Their style is not idealised but presents an actuality with all its "accidentals, irregularities and lack of proportions."<sup>51</sup> In order to understand the difference, he says, one must appreciate that the art of the North was not concerned with beauty or ugliness. Ugliness was intended to suppress all material aspects and to concentrate all attention on the 'soul'.<sup>52</sup> Rembrandt's particular genius was to do just that. His homely Virgin has little physical attraction and neither does the child she holds, but the emotion she exudes is palpable. Rembrandt allows the viewer a glimpse of the soul and he did this through his use of light. Muller-Freienfels points to the light as the measure of outstanding difference in

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<sup>48</sup> Clark, *Rembrandt and the Italian Renaissance*, 28.

<sup>49</sup> *Rembrandt Documents*, 369-371.

<sup>50</sup> Richard Muller-Freienfels, "On Visual Representation: The Meaning of Pictures and Symbols", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 7.2 (1948): 115.

<sup>51</sup> Muller-Freienfels, 116.

<sup>52</sup> Muller-Freienfels, 116.

Rembrandt's work: Rembrandt's miraculous use of light, he says, is something people are not aware of seeing – what they do see is what that light makes visible.<sup>53</sup>

## Theological considerations

Hans Martin Rotermund concentrates on Rembrandt's use of light. In a study of the motif of radiance in Rembrandt's work, he examines Rembrandt's use of the halo or rays of light. He suggests that Rembrandt is acting in a particular way in omitting or using rays.<sup>54</sup> Rotermund seeks to distinguish the formal element of the 'halo' from its inner significance. He notes that Rembrandt normally depicts Christ without a halo. Where Rembrandt does use "stronger radiance of any type, it usually serves to emphasize an important symbolic meaning."<sup>55</sup> Rotermund observes that Rembrandt uses halos to differentiate between scenes of where Christ is not recognised and scenes of awareness.<sup>56</sup> By using light in such a way Rembrandt succeeds in expressing something "fundamentally undepictable."<sup>57</sup> He considers this characteristic of Rembrandt's "profoundly Protestant approach" – that he uses a "simple symbol as the means of expressing the central claim of the Gospel" that this Jewish Rabbi is "the anointed of God."<sup>58</sup>

Rotermund confines himself to Rembrandt's representations of Christ in his ministry, but what happens when his theory of light is extrapolated to cover other works? Clearly in his *Virgin and Child in the Clouds*, Rembrandt is using light to signal the fundamentally undepictable. He combines two traditional elements, the halo and the ray, as Rotermund suggests, but he uses them here to illuminate not the figure of Christ himself but that of his mother, as if to emphasise the messianic promise that was fulfilled through her. The Virgin is backed by a radiance which does not yet seem to encompass her for she is backed by light but partially surrounded by tumultuous and threatening clouds. The importance of her son is indicated only by a semi-halo as if, for both, the work of salvation had just begun. Rotermund does not use this etching as an example, but he does note that a tradition deriving from medieval art uses rays

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<sup>53</sup> Muller-Freienfels, 116.

<sup>54</sup> Hans Martin Rotermund, "The Motif of Radiance in Rembrandt's Biblical Drawings", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 15 (1952): 101.

<sup>55</sup> Rotermund, "The Motif of Radiance", 104.

<sup>56</sup> Rotermund, 110.

<sup>57</sup> Rotermund, 111.

<sup>58</sup> Rotermund, 111.

of light to represent the theological doctrine of a human being – in this case the Virgin Mary, reached by Divine summons – in illustrations of the Immaculate Conception.<sup>59</sup>

The significance of radiance is of particular interest in analysing the iconography of *The Virgin and Child in the Clouds*, as is Rotermund's acknowledgement that images of the Immaculate Conception provide a good example how light is used to intimate a heavenly realm. In comparing Rembrandt's Virgin to that of a roughly contemporary, though Spanish, artist Diego Velázquez (1599-1660), it can be seen that Velázquez' *Virgin of the Immaculate Conception* (fig.230) and Rembrandt's *Virgin and Child in the Clouds* are linked by the motif of radiance. Velázquez places his young Virgin at the mouth of heaven. Billowing clouds erupt from golden depths behind her and give a very real sense of another luminous world beyond.<sup>60</sup> Rembrandt, too, places his Virgin sitting at the entrance to this luminous world, limited by the restrictions of medium and technique to the light and shadow of radiating lines and squiggles. This does not however lessen the feeling of depth and space and mysterious light. Rembrandt anticipates the Virgin's place in heaven in his *Death of the Virgin*. The *Virgin and Child in the Clouds* is the only work in which he places her in the heavenly realm.

An acceptance of the belief in the Immaculate Conception, that the Mother of Christ herself had been conceived without sin, grounds all depictions of the heavenly Virgin. Mary's Assumption and her presence in the heavens were contingent on the belief that the privilege accorded by God to be the human mother of his son extended to her own sinless conception. The Franciscan theologian Duns Scotus (c.1236-1308) elaborated the doctrine most clearly in arguing the necessity for Mary's conception without sin as God's preparation for her to become the fitting mother of God.<sup>61</sup> These ideas had originated in the Greek Church in the second century after the death of Christ and quickly spread to the West, where their theological merits were argued with various degrees of rhetoric over the intervening centuries.<sup>62</sup> The dogmatic difficulty was to become a religious and political issue between theologians

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<sup>59</sup> Rotermund, 112.

<sup>60</sup> There is no evidence so far to suggest that Rembrandt had seen any of Velázquez' work, but it hardly seems possible that, in a world where Spanish influence had been so strong and in a town which was the centre for trade and industries for the vibrant Dutch economy, at least some indication of Spanish art was not to be found. The Immaculate Conception was at the same time a popular theme in Italian art.

<sup>61</sup> Ruben, *Mother of God*, 303.

<sup>62</sup> Suzanne Stratton, *The Immaculate Conception in Spanish Art* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994): 2.

themselves and between two religious orders that supported opposite sides of the debate, the Franciscans and the Dominicans. The Franciscans argued for doctrinal acceptance of the Immaculate Conception, the Dominicans against it.<sup>63</sup>

The theological issues surrounding the Immaculate Conception became most hotly debated in Spain. The visualisation of the Virgin as the Immaculate Conceiver emerged there as a pastiche of motifs which embraced any or all of the attributes associated with her. The theme became a popular advertorial for those who wanted the belief to be made a dogma of faith, so much so that the Spanish painter, Francisco Pacheco (d.1654), formulated a set of rules for such iconography.<sup>64</sup> As Rubin describes it, “the representation of Mary as immaculate situated her beyond the domestic and the mundane and drew her into places replete with majestic and celestial imagery.”<sup>65</sup> Such visualisations invariably placed the Virgin before the brilliant depths of heaven, light emanating from behind her. She is sometimes accompanied by angels, sometimes shown as the woman of the Apocalypse with the crescent moon at her feet, sometimes crowned as the Queen of Heaven. These representations were not confined to Catholic Spain and Italy – representations found their way to Germany and the Low Countries. Dürer used haloes to manifest difference in something of the same way that Rembrandt later used them in his etching. In one of several reproductions of this theme, *The Virgin on the Crescent Moon with Diadem* (1514) (fig.231), Dürer gives the Virgin a double halo and uses the staggered and cross-shaped halo for the Christ child. An anonymous centre panel of the Immaculate Conception for a triptych now in the Catharijneconvent in Utrecht (fig.232) and a printed version of the same subject by Carel de Mallery (1566-1628) after Maerten de Vos (1532-1603) (fig.233) for example, show that the subject was also present in the Low Countries and varied only in the detail.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> For an interpretation of some of the issues involved in this long-running theological debate see Rubin, 303-305; Graef, *Mary, A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, 298-322; Pelikan, *Mary, Through the Centuries*, 189-200.

<sup>64</sup> A distinctive iconography of the Immaculate Conception incorporated the image of the Apocalyptic Virgin. In his *Arte de la Pintura* (1649) Pacheco gave a set of rules for the painting of this image which included that she be dressed as a Portuguese woman with a white dress and blue mantel (Rubin, *Mother of God*, 410). See also Stratton, *The Immaculate Conception in Spanish Art*, 77. Stratton gives a well-researched history of the evolution of Immaculate Conception imagery in religious art. She notes that understanding the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is crucial to an understanding of the many images of the Virgin. Although her analysis focuses on Spanish art, this applies as importantly to most images of the Virgin Mary.

<sup>65</sup> Rubin, 304.

<sup>66</sup> De Vos was a prolific print-maker working in Antwerp, whose work was widely copied.

The great problem for the Protestants was that under the title of the Immaculate Conception and its resultant ideology, the Virgin was worshipped alone.<sup>67</sup> Although she appears on some occasions with the child in her arms as she does in the Dürer, the anonymous panel in Utrecht, and Carel de Mallery's works, it is the Virgin who is given prominence rather than the child. As already noted, the Reformers opposed veneration of Mary as anything other than the mother of the Redeemer.<sup>68</sup>

Rembrandt's *Virgin and Child in the Clouds* takes the Immaculate Conception and her concomitant place in heaven for granted. However, it embraces several further titles under which Mary is honoured within Catholic devotion. The Virgin in this particular work, despite the fact that she sits at the entrance to the heavens, is recognisably a woman of sorrows, her expression and posture show this and it is the Woman of Sorrows who is most closely tied to the doctrine of Mary as Mediatrix.<sup>69</sup> Pelikan notes the inter-relationship of these two doctrines by calling them 'correlative'. Simeon's prophecy had long been taken for the experience Mary would have to endure as "the most involved spectator at the crucifixion", as well as referring to her own death. The combination of the grieving mother at the foot of the cross and the soul pierced by a sword unleashed a flood of literary and artistic works which noted her pain and invoked her help.<sup>70</sup> The title Mediatrix applied not only to Mary's place in the history of salvation but also to her on-going role as intercessor between God and suffering humanity.<sup>71</sup>

Earliest mentions of the Virgin under this title had been made in the sixth century but the term did not gain wide acceptance until the Middle Ages.<sup>72</sup> The visual history

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<sup>67</sup> Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 251.

<sup>68</sup> Warner, 251, Pelikan, *Mary, Through the Centuries*, 199-200.

<sup>69</sup> Perlove and Silver note a focus on Mary's grief occasioned by the prophecy of Simeon in the temple (Perlove and Silver, *Rembrandt's Faith*, 51-52); See also Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries* 125.

<sup>70</sup> Pelikan, 125-135.

<sup>71</sup> Pelikan, 132.

<sup>72</sup> A recognition of Mary as Mediatrix began as early as the sixth century with the orthodox poet Romanos (c.490-c.530), who extolled the Virgin with images of her presence within the clouds and of her human presence at the foot of the cross. She was not only the human mother of Christ but she was "the mighty intercessor for all humanity" (Graef, *Mary, A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, 126). The term 'mediatrix' did not gain wide acceptance until the Middle Ages where Peter Damian (c.1007-1072) called the Virgin "the gate of Paradise, which restored God to the world and opened heaven to us". Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) describes her as "the one through whom we ascend to him who descended through her to us" quoted in Eva de Visscher, "Marian Devotion in the Latin West in the Late Middle Ages". In Sarah Jane Boss, ed. *Mary, The Complete Resource* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007): 181. Mary Hind notes that, in the medieval period leading up to Luther's time, there was an evident trend to attribute to Mary "power and activity more properly belonging to God alone." Marian devotion tended to extravagant forms. Jesus and his role moved to the background both in devotions and in the popular imagination. Mary became a gentle and understanding mediator between



of this theme grew out of human need. According to Warner, the years of the plagues saw hundreds of fourteenth-and fifteenth-century paintings showing Christ the Judge with Mary at his side imploring his mercy. Intimate devotion had made the Virgin a “kindly and approachable figure” who could be relied on for pity and comfort. The cult of the *Mater Dolorosa* stressed her participation in the problems and suffering of all mankind. Her sorrows became the commonplace of ordinary human existence and a recognisable and sympathetic link with the Almighty.<sup>73</sup> Mary became the ideal woman with whom to identify oneself – who better then to hear one’s own needs and to place them before her son. The popularity of the cult of the *Mater Dolorosa* was to a large extent disseminated through Franciscan spirituality.<sup>74</sup>

This particular work might have suggested a double problem for the Protestant reformers. Not only was Mary shown in a prominent role illuminated by the light of heaven, but she is also shown visibly directing her own needs to God. Yet as a *Mater Dolorosa* she had a contemporary value. The needs of Rembrandt’s own time had changed little. There were still successive waves of the plague; his personal needs were invested in his sick wife. In such times who but the Virgin, who had experienced suffering and death, could help? Yet it was this mediating presence that the Reformers condemned. It was, according to Luther and to Calvin, this belief in the mediating role of the Virgin Mary which was most identified with ‘popery’ and this had to be expunged.<sup>75</sup>

## The iconography

Rembrandt’s *Virgin and Child in the Clouds* challenges the basis of Reformed acceptability because it does not show the human Mary placed within a human or historical setting. The Virgin sits instead in a flattened space among tumultuous clouds which bank up threateningly to the right of the etching. Her head and body are

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sinful humanity and “a distant and sometimes vengeful Christ.” See Mary E. Hines, ‘Mary’ in Michael Downey, ed. *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993): 637.

<sup>73</sup> Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 216.

<sup>74</sup> Visscher, “Marian Devotion in the Latin West”, 183.

<sup>75</sup> Bernard Cottret repeats a story which illustrates Calvin’s position on this matter. In 1542 a woman, Jeanne Petreman, appeared before the consistory – she had attended a Mass outside Geneva and had said her Pater Noster in the Roman tongue. She was admonished by Calvin who accused her of consummate popery. “She said the Virgin Mary is her advocate. She said the Virgin is the friend of God and the daughter and mother of Christ”. This guilty woman has put herself outside the church and one could only hope that “the Lord would touch her heart” and she would recognize her errors. *Annales Calviniani*, OC 21, col.296., quoted in Cottret, *Calvin, A Biography*, 174.

framed by a radiant light, an almost full-body halo intimated by a mandorla of dots from which radiate flashes of energy – Visser 't Hooft describes the effect as a “garland of light”.<sup>76</sup> The Virgin leans slightly to the right; her head tilted over her shoulder, her eyes looking upwards and out into the distant right of the picture. Her lips are slightly parted. Her expression is at the same time pensive and sad. She holds the child in her arms, a child that is not sleeping quietly as Williams observes.<sup>77</sup> He lies, eyes partly open, at the moment between wakefulness and sleep.

From the head of the child, densely packed shafts of light erupt indicating the future status of the child. His hands are clenched, intimating an innate response to the obvious unease of his mother. Her own hands are clasped low around the child. Williams speaks of the interlaced fingers of the Virgin's hands, which she uses to illustrate one of the similarities between this etching and Barocci's *Madonna in the Clouds*.<sup>78</sup> However, closer inspection shows that the fingers of Rembrandt's Virgin are not elegantly interlaced in the same fashion (fig.234) as those in Barocci's etching (fig.235). Instead they are held, one over the other, in a manner which suggests more apprehension and protection than a motherly embrace. Such a depth of tension has little relevance to Barocci's etching.<sup>79</sup>

The halo that surrounds Barocci's Virgin's head is backed by tightly-worked rays forming a circular nimbus which contains the depth of the celestial background to an almost flat plane. Rembrandt, instead, suggests a heavenly infinity, but the Virgin is not yet there. The Virgin, her child and the cloud formation in which they sit, frame the entrance. Reading the use of light as intimating a divine summons, Rembrandt's Virgin appears somewhat ambivalent about that divine choice. Although she is prominent (but not centred), she is radiant with light but has only a faintly-indicated halo. The fan of rays emanating from the head of the child shows that *he* is the important subject, not his mother, yet he too appears dependent on the heavenly light which surrounds the Virgin. Rembrandt's placement of the fan of light erupting from the child's head overwrites a fuller radiance which surrounds his mother and which can still be seen through the lines of the baby's halo. It appears almost as if he has reworked the plate. The heavily-scored bars of light may indicate that Rembrandt

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<sup>76</sup> Visser 't Hooft, *Rembrandt and the Gospel*, 44.

<sup>77</sup> Williams, *Rembrandt's Women*, 173.

<sup>78</sup> Williams, 173.

<sup>79</sup> Broos states that Jakob Valentiner (1904) sees Dürer as a source and F. Schmidt-Degener (1919, 1928) attributes the source to Barocci. See *Broos Index to the Formal Sources of Rembrandt's Art*, B61, 75.

decided to change the focus of this subject from the Virgin to her son after he had begun the etching.

Rembrandt here makes an important choice; he separates his iconography from that of Barocci or Raphael or Reni by altering the emotional content, and through his use of light. Barocci's Virgin is double-haloed and the child is lit by her reflected radiance, for he has no radiance of his own. This follows the visual tradition. Rotermund indicates that during the childhood of Jesus, Mary might be crowned with rays in his stead.<sup>80</sup> Rembrandt's choice is deliberate; it is from the child's head that the densest rays emanate, which stresses the fact that salvation comes through the son and not his mother.<sup>81</sup> But his emphasis remains on the Virgin. It is as if he acknowledges the unique power of the son, but he deliberately etches him as a dependent child, humanly helpless without his mother, in order to stress the mediating role of the Virgin as both Christ's mother and mother to all who come to her for help. This is not the only way Rembrandt manipulates light.

A close examination of the etching shows that although Mary is illuminated from behind by a backdrop of intense celestial light, there is an additional issue of light which comes from the front left side of the plate. This illuminates the side of her face, the forehead of the child and the left side of her veil and gown but leaves the right side of the Virgin, as we see her, in comparative shadow. It appears to be natural light which illuminates the faces and expressions of those on whom the viewer is invited to meditate. Rembrandt has cleverly made the Virgin, seated at the gates of heaven, the mediating link between this world and the next. That transition is obviously painful and difficult, as difficult for her as for all human-kind and it is in this sympathetic recognition that the viewer finds comfort. The position of the child, lying across the Virgin's knees, suggests that the transition through death to new life will be accomplished, through the life and death of her son. Rembrandt has etched not so much a Virgin in the Clouds as a *Mater Dolorosa*, a suggestion which both Visser 't Hooft and Williams have also noted but not pursued.<sup>82</sup>

Scholars have identified this etching as a *Virgin in the Clouds* because it recalls similar works of that name. To my mind, however, the etching has a deeper significance when it is considered in the context of a biblical passage from Matthew's

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<sup>80</sup> Stratten, *The Immaculate Conception in Spanish Art*, 117.

<sup>81</sup> Visser 't Hooft, *Rembrandt and the Gospel*, 45.

<sup>82</sup> Visser 't Hooft, *Rembrandt and the Gospel*, 44; Williams, *Rembrandt's Women*, 173.

story of the Passion and Death of Christ (Matthew 26:64). Before the High Priest, Christ answers his accusers: “Moreover I tell you that from this time onward you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the power and coming on the clouds of heaven.”<sup>83</sup> Here the magnificence of heaven, and with it the power of the Son of Man, is identified in visual terms as Christ seated in the clouds. Rembrandt references the visual tradition by showing the Virgin with her son seated in the clouds but he takes that familiar Marian trope further and integrates it with ideas of messianic promise and the story of the Passion itself. The placing of a small child on the right arm of his mother in place of the “Son of Man at the right arm of power” makes sense when seen in the light of this biblical text. Read in this way, Rembrandt’s etching seems to prefigure Christ’s own condemnation and death.

As Christ is foretelling what is to come when he enters his Kingdom, so Mary sits at the gate of that Kingdom with the God/child in her arms. Both have yet to endure the transition between this life and the next, both frighteningly aware of what is to come. Such ideas seem to be playing on Rembrandt’s mind. He has placed Mary at the cusp of heaven and lights her, not with the radiance of eternity, but seemingly with the reflected glow of her son’s nimbus. He shows the disquiet when he etches in the focus of the Virgin’s gaze. Her eyes do not look down on the child as would a Madonna of Humility or the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception. She does not look up to heaven either, as would a Virgin of the Assumption, or directly at the viewer, as would a Queen of Heaven. Instead, Rembrandt shows her looking slightly up towards the heavens as if she herself is seeking help from God.

Rembrandt etches in its most human expression the confusion and concern that Mary’s acceptance of the Angel’s invitation has initiated. Her consent to God’s invitation to be the mother of his son had already been cast in ominous terms through the prophecy of Simeon. The clouds that roil around the Virgin are not the fluffy bursts of Barocci’s etching; they are dark, tumultuous and threatening. Rembrandt curves and cross-hatches his lines into an ever deeper confusion; they are at the same time the clouds of heaven and the clouds of darkness. There is an intimation of chaos and shadow beneath the Virgin’s feet. Her pose is not one that of Barocci’s Virgin. She is not artfully arranged but appears to have dropped to her knees in abject helplessness.

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<sup>83</sup> Matthew 26: 64-65.

Ideas of premonition, of a human Virgin helplessly aware through the prophecy of Simeon of what life would hold, both for herself and for her precious son, can be supported by an examination of the aberration which makes this print notable to scholarly eyes – the inverted etching of the head of a woman on the Virgin’s left knee. Perlove and Silver identify it as a “cherubic face”, begun in emulation of Barocci’s print which Rembrandt later decided against and reversed the plate.<sup>84</sup>

Such interpretations need to be re-examined. Rembrandt was a consummate etcher. To my knowledge, no errors of such importance have been found in any others of his etched works.<sup>85</sup> Had Rembrandt misjudged his proportions, it was a simple technical matter to burnish out such imperfections on a soft copper etching-plate. The burnisher is a tool made for that purpose. Likewise, the nature of Rembrandt’s shadow hatching around the knee of the Virgin could easily have been manipulated to cover such an imperfection had Rembrandt thought it necessary.

Nor is the face on the knee of the Virgin in Rembrandt’s *Virgin and Child in the Clouds* a reflection of the Virgin’s face. Visually, if it were to be a reflection, it would not be seen as we see it as a full face on the Virgin’s knee. It does not align with the face of the Virgin, nor share similar proportions. It carries neither the same expression nor the same inclination and the features are more mature. A careful examination of this second face suggests another explanation. At one level it can legitimately be read as an intimation of what lies ahead for the Virgin: she appears older, suffering and alone. Mary, as the Gospel story tells us, knows what is before her and Rembrandt turns her face away from the vision of that future towards the God in whom she has put her trust. Rembrandt confuses the viewer about meaning and purpose. It is possible that part of the reason for this is because he is, at the same time, investing the etching with deep personal meaning.

At this level, this etching may reflect Rembrandt’s deeper concerns. In the year this etching was made (1641), Rembrandt was surrounded by suffering and death. His wife Saskia had given birth to three children, Rombartus (d. 1636) Cornelia (d. 1638)

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<sup>84</sup> Perlove and Silver, *Rembrandt’s Faith*, 51. The British Museum’s Standard Report on this etching notes also that this face on the knee represents a false start. The artist, they say, soon realized that the head was too small and poorly positioned so he turned the plate 180 degrees and started again. See The British Museum – Merlin Database P&D Standard Report accessed 05 Sept. 2008.

<sup>85</sup> Although there are many instances of alterations to plates and changes made between one state and another, this appears to be the only obvious *pentimento* left unaltered. A small head of the Virgin is noted at the top of a plate bearing a self-portrait of Rembrandt (B5) but by the third state the plate had been cut down to remove the Virgin’s head. See White and Boon, *Rembrandt’s Etchings*, 2.

and a second Cornelia (d. 1640). Neither of the two girls lived longer than two weeks.<sup>86</sup> A second son, Titus, baptised in September 1641, was Rembrandt's only living child by Saskia. Rembrandt's mother died in 1640, Saskia's sister in June 1641 and Saskia herself was a sick woman; she was to die in June 1642.

The years up to Saskia's death saw Rembrandt make numerous quick sketches of Saskia in bed (fig.236) and Saskia careworn and tired (fig.237). Placed against such images it seems obvious where part of the inspiration for Rembrandt's *Virgin and Child in the Clouds* lies, just as it had for the *Death of the Virgin*. The face of the Virgin is that of Saskia. Put side by side, Rembrandt's head of the Virgin and two of the four studies of Saskia made in c.1636 are strikingly similar (fig.238 a, b, c), there is the same incline of the head, the same slightly opened mouth the same weary sadness; only the direction in which she is looking has changed. The Virgin in *Virgin and Child in the Clouds* looks upwards and to the right of the picture, the face of Saskia in the study looks up and to the left of the picture. Christopher Wright does, in fact, suggest that Rembrandt uses Saskia and Titus as his models for his *Virgin and Child in the Clouds*.<sup>87</sup>

It is not only the face of the Virgin in the etching which can be closely identified with an image of Saskia. The face of the woman etched onto the Virgin's knee can be similarly linked to a Rembrandt etching of Saskia. A study made c.1641, *Saskia Sick Wearing a White Headdress* (fig.239), shows a remarkable resemblance in facial and eye structure to Rembrandt's 'Virgin on the knee' (fig.240). Although the position of the head is not identical, both are veiled women, heavy-eyed with deep bags beneath their eyes and their lips slightly apart. Another explanation is possible. Rembrandt may have begun with an image of Saskia and later decided to rework the plate as the Virgin. In this case he may have chosen to leave the inverted head as a visual link to his sick Saskia. Rembrandt appears to fill this etching with his concerns about his sick wife and his pride in and fear for his newborn son; in identifying Saskia with the Virgin, he both fears for her present and hopes for her future. Poised as the Virgin is on the brink of heaven, the bright prospect beyond might have given Rembrandt some comfort. The Virgin had not yet made her *transitus*, nor yet had Rembrandt's Saskia.

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<sup>86</sup> Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes*, 502.

<sup>87</sup> See Christopher Wright, *Rembrandt and His World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1966): 62.

## Conclusion

As Clark has pointed out, “if the Virgin had been on the ground all would be well.”<sup>88</sup> A visual interpretation would then have placed this etching securely within the iconographic framework of a ‘Madonna of Humility’. Although Rembrandt references ideas of a Madonna of Humility, he subverts them. Other artists use this model and place the Virgin among the clouds, amidst glowing light and angels, with or without other motifs which identify the subject with one or other of the Virgin’s titles. The essence of these other artist’s images was a sense of quiet and profound meditation on the child in the Virgin’s arms amidst the glory of heaven. It is such iconography that Raphael, Dürer, and Barocci exhibit with their beautiful contemplative virgins and their plump healthy babies lit by rays and stars or even accompanied by angels. Rembrandt’s sad Virgin sits in the clouds; she is neither a Madonna of the Clouds as previous artists have portrayed her, nor an earthbound Virgin of Humility. She absorbs the Nativity narrative in the presence of her son and she references the Assumption and the Queenship of Mary in her presence among the clouds. Far greater though is her kinship with the *Mater Dolorosa*.

Rembrandt strays far from the Protestant path and into a theological morass with his *Virgin and Child in the Clouds*. Swirling around him both textually and visually were identifications of the Virgin tied to strong political and religious forces. Internecine philosophical battles with visual representations as their outward exemplars encouraged outpourings of supportive art. The Immaculate Conception was one of these, as was a belief in the Assumption of the Virgin bodily into heaven or representations of Mary as Queen of Heaven. More Catholic still was a belief in Mary as mediatrix, the one through whom help from her son could be sought. Jaroslav Pelikan points out that the iconographic tradition and the theological one had developed almost separately, with the two parts never being clearly harmonised.<sup>89</sup> As has been the case with the doctrine of Mary throughout history, he says, “Christian art has often anticipated the development of dogma.”<sup>90</sup> Rembrandt deftly weaves such strands together into a single image.

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<sup>88</sup> Clark, *Rembrandt and the Italian Renaissance*, 27.

<sup>89</sup> Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries* 194. The origins of the title ‘Mother of God’ are obscure, says Pelikan, the first authenticated use came from Alexandria c. 319. The Immaculate Conception was declared dogma (laid down by the authority of the Church) in 1854. The Assumption was not declared dogma until 1950.

<sup>90</sup> Pelikan, 194.

Rembrandt fixes on Simeon's prophecy (Luke 2: 22-28) and prefigures the agony and death of the Virgin's son and his ultimate victory over death. His deep empathy with biblical text and, in particular, the story of the passion and death of Christ, a subject which had occupied much of his work in the 1630s, suggests that he may have drawn on Christ's words (Matthew 26:64-65) as an underlying idea. Rembrandt pictures his Virgin as Madonna of Humility, Virgin in the Clouds, Queen of Heaven and Assumed Virgin but, much more intimately, as the Woman of Sorrows. It has been suggested here that he has etched his own Saskia in her place. I propose that Rembrandt's reference to Barocci's *Madonna in the Clouds* is minimal. There is some stylistic compatibility in the pose but none in the emotional and spiritual content. Inevitably, Rembrandt's etching is a work invested with deep recognition. The Virgin emerges as seemingly a personal declaration of faith, a faith that encompasses pain and fear, sickness and loss but ultimately hope.

Despite the efforts of Perlove and Silver to contextualise this work within a Protestant tradition, their reading remains unconvincing. They rightly identify the emotion of the work as closely tied to ideas of Simeon's prophetic announcement to the Virgin at the Presentation and its further evolution in the passion and death of Christ. They note also the humble demeanour of the Virgin and Child and recognise it as a Protestant perception of Mary's limited role. She is a recipient of God's grace, meritless in her own right.

However, the "stocky and earthy" Virgin, as Perlove and Silver describe her, with her "extreme lowliness and humility", may be more a matter of Rembrandt's style than his conscious choice to reflect a Protestant concept. Muller-Freienfels suggests Rembrandt's homely Virgins reflect an understanding of beauty based on a different set of values which separate Northern art from its Italian counterpart.<sup>91</sup> Christopher Brown argues that the very special circumstances of the Northern Netherlands "led to the creation of art which was strikingly different from art of elsewhere in Western Europe."<sup>92</sup> A new society gave rise to new art and a decisive break with the past. Earlier artists were trained in traditional methods, he says, only exceptional artists could break the mould and were encouraged to do so.<sup>93</sup> Such suggestions remain the

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<sup>91</sup> Richard Freienfels, "On Visual Representation: The Meaning of Pictures and Symbols." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 7.2 (1948): 112-121.

<sup>92</sup> Brown, *The Dutchness of Dutch Art*, 6.

<sup>93</sup> Brown, 10.



subject of considerable research and academic diversity.<sup>94</sup> It is possible, however, to propose that Rembrandt's uniqueness may have been linked as much to different cultural attitudes as to his unique powers of interpretation.

The scope and identity of this work lies within the Catholic tradition. It relies on an understanding of Mary's place in the Mariology of that church. She is at all times worthy of honour in her own right. She is the humble mother and it is that very simplicity and her faithful acceptance of the will of God that makes her the role model which Protestant teaching would allow her to be. Those are the qualities that make her accessible. Catholic doctrine takes that role further. For the believing Catholic and the hopeful petitioner, she is the empathetic mother who would carry to her son the hopes and needs of those who come to her for help.

Rembrandt's breadth of vision acknowledges that role in his skilful iconography in a way which is limited by analysis which ties it to a comparison with the work of a single artist. His visual reference to his wife and perhaps, as White suggests, also to his son, proposes a personal investment which can only be guessed at. The picture itself remains as enigmatic as the face on the knee, placed, and left there for a reason known only to Rembrandt himself. As Schwartz rightly notes, *The Virgin and Child in the Clouds* remains a Catholic theme, unique in Dutch seventeenth-century art.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> For an overview of the stylistic qualities of seventeenth-century Dutch painting see: Henk van Veen and Franz Grijzenhout, eds. *Golden Age of Dutch Painting in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>95</sup> Schwartz, *The Complete Etchings of Rembrandt*, B61.

## *Virgin with the Instruments of the Passion, c.1652.*

### Introduction

Rembrandt's small etching, *Virgin with the Instruments of the Passion* (fig.241), depicts the Virgin Mary as a solitary figure mourning the death of her son. Where the *Virgin and Child in the Clouds* suggests a *Mater Dolorosa* through the placement of the figures and the general sense of sadness it imparts, the *Virgin with the Instruments of the Passion* is more recognisably so. This work no longer alludes to the transcendent nature of the Virgin as does the *Virgin and Child in the Clouds* but appears to concentrate solely on the human Mary as she contemplates the instruments of her son's torture and death.

The heavily veiled Virgin is represented half-length. Her body is placed at a slightly oblique angle with the face in semi-profile and inclined to the right. Rembrandt has situated her behind a stone slab, suggestive of a tomb, on which are placed the instruments of the passion: the crown of thorns, three nails and a shroud. Otto Benesch suggests that there is also an ointment jar present together with the nails and the crown of thorns and this same observation is made by Anat Gilboa.<sup>1</sup> An ointment jar is not immediately apparent but, if this were present, it could suggest another reading of the iconography which will be discussed later in this chapter. The Virgin raises her right hand with the palm held towards the viewer. The left hand is stretched out, palm down and flattened. Some of the fingers appear to lift the edges of the cloth gathered before her, as if to indicate its importance and further emphasize the poignancy of the scene. Behind her, a curved and broken stone wall gives some semblance of an outdoor setting.

The etching is unsigned and the chronology has been disputed. Benesch gives the date as around 1641, as does Arthur Hind.<sup>2</sup> This aligns the theme with one that had occupied Rembrandt for most of the 1630s, his commission to paint the Passion Series for the Stadhouder Frederik Hendrik. Further studies of the chronological pattern of Rembrandt's style and subject matter have questioned this dating and it is now generally believed that the etching was made ten years later, around 1652.<sup>3</sup> Münz

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<sup>1</sup> See Eva Benesch, ed. *Otto Benesch: Collected Writings*, 151; Gilboa, *Images of the Feminine*, 64.

<sup>2</sup> Benesch, 151. Hind, *A Catalogue of Rembrandt Etchings*, 92.

<sup>3</sup> Münz, *Rembrandt's Etchings*, 49. See also Schwartz, *The Complete Etchings of Rembrandt*, B85.

alone dates this work to c.1654 and describes this later period of Rembrandt's life as one in which he appeared to have been haunted by themes of death and resurrection.<sup>4</sup> The same contemplative mood of the etching can be seen in the figure of the Virgin who looks down on the body of her dead son seen in the etching, *The Entombment* (c.1654).<sup>5</sup>

The re-evaluated date of 1652 places this etching within another period of intense activity around the same subject, the death and burial of Christ. Rembrandt made his famous etched series, *The Three Crosses*, around 1653.<sup>6</sup> *The Three Crosses* was produced in five separate states showing an intensive reworking of the subject. Only the third of these five states is signed and dated: *Rembrandt f. 1653*, suggesting that the first two states might be earlier than 1653. It is then entirely conceivable that Rembrandt was etching the *Virgin with the Instruments of the Passion* at the same time as he was working out his concept for *The Three Crosses* and that this etching forms a further meditation on that theme.

In the many scenes of the Passion made during Rembrandt's life, the Virgin is generally shown as a supplementary figure – in various degrees of grief or collapse – either at the foot of the cross or receiving Christ's body after his death. His earliest visual reference to her place within the Passion narrative is seen in an etching, *The Descent from the Cross* (1633), a work made in conjunction with the first of the *Passion Series* made for Frederick Hendrick.<sup>7</sup> Here he shows Mary as a shadowy figure seen beneath the ladder as the body of her son is lowered from the cross. Another etching, *The Crucifixion: Small Plate* (c.1635), gives the Virgin more prominence as she collapses to the ground at the foot of the cross. In the *Passion Series* itself the Virgin is shown only twice. She is shown prostrate in the shadows in the bottom left-hand corner of *The Descent from the Cross* (c.1632) and again as a mourner at Christ's feet in *The Entombment* (1639).<sup>8</sup> But a concentration on the Virgin herself is not found until Rembrandt records the pain of this mother at the loss of her son on the page of sketches *Studies of the Mater Dolorosa and Other Mourners* thought to have been made in 1637 (fig.242).

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<sup>4</sup> Münz, 49.

<sup>5</sup> Image source: Schwartz, *The Complete Etchings of Rembrandt*, B86

<sup>6</sup> Image source: Schwartz, *The Complete Etchings of Rembrandt*, B78

<sup>7</sup> Image source: Schwartz, *The Complete Etchings of Rembrandt*, B81

<sup>8</sup> Image source: Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book*, 154, 155.

Two later paintings have been identified as further representations of the *Mater Dolorosa*. Arthur Wheelock suggests that a half-length painting of Hendrickje Stoffels made in 1660 (fig.243) could be identified as *Hendrickje Stoffels (as the Sorrowing Virgin?)*. He bases this interpretation on the similarity between this work and Titian's image of the *Mater Dolorosa* (1554) (fig.244) which, he says, Rembrandt could have known through one of the many copies that were made.<sup>9</sup> A final representation of this theme is found in a painting made in 1661 known as *The Virgin of Sorrows* (fig.245). These works will be referred to later in this chapter.

## The critics

Perhaps because of the overtly Catholic nature of the subject, this small etching arouses little more than a mention in the literature. Most comment is limited to speculation about date, notes on the medium and perceived sources for the iconography. Hind, for example, notes only the technical details of the work and suggests that the unusual character of the print could be explained if "one regards Rembrandt as working on the basis of another artist's composition (possibly a *Mater Dolorosa* by Titian)."<sup>10</sup> Münz relates this work to Rembrandt's earlier painting of *The Entombment* (1639) and again suggests Titian's *Mater Dolorosa* as an example.<sup>11</sup> Neither Ackley nor White includes this work in their studies of Rembrandt's etchings. In his *The Complete Etchings of Rembrandt*, Schwartz notes only that this work has no specific biblical reference.<sup>12</sup> Gilboa describes the etching as one which relies on Pre-Reformation devotional art for its subject and that it would probably hold more appeal for a Catholic audience.<sup>13</sup> Williams again notes the style, describing this work as "sketchily executed", but states that it has been recognised from early times for its moving depiction of the mother of Christ. She suggests that such a "staunchly Catholic image" of the sorrow of Mary would have little appeal outside the Roman Church.<sup>14</sup>

Perlove and Silver suggest the work can also be read from a Protestant perspective. They acknowledge the association of this theme with Catholic imagery,

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<sup>9</sup> Wheelock and Sutton, *Rembrandt's Late Religious Portraits*, 86-88.

<sup>10</sup> Hind, *A Catalogue of Rembrandt's Etchings*, 92.

<sup>11</sup> Münz, *Rembrandt's Etchings*, 107. Image source: Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book*, 267

<sup>12</sup> Schwartz, *The Complete Etchings of Rembrandt*, B85.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Gilboa, *Images of the Feminine* 64-65.

<sup>14</sup> Williams, *Rembrandt's Women*, 200.

but their analysis suggests a reading more in line with Calvinist dictums. They argue that lack of a halo on the Virgin Mary and the fact that she “does not worship the relics before her”, but instead directs her gaze to a scene out of sight to the right, indicates that Rembrandt has rejected a Catholic interpretation of the theme.<sup>15</sup> Such a reading of this etching does not take sufficient account of the tradition from which the scene emerges.

## A history of the image

Mary’s suffering is grounded in two separate biblical incidents, the prophetic words spoken by Simeon at the presentation of Christ in the Temple, and the final words of Christ from the cross. In some of his last words, Christ both acknowledged the Virgin’s presence at the scene of his Crucifixion and his concern for her future well-being as his mother: “Seeing his mother and the disciple he loved standing near her, Jesus said to his mother, “Woman, this is your son”. Then to the disciple he said, “This is your mother” (John 19: 26-27). Since John’s description of the final moments of Christ’s life seems clearly the fulfilment of Simeon’s warning in the Gospel of Luke, these two different scriptural references came eventually to inspire two separate visual types of the *Mater Dolorosa*, Mary as the Virgin of Sorrows and Mary at the foot of the cross.

Earliest representations place Mary in various states of grief at the scene of the crucifixion, either at the foot of the cross or, in the later scene of the lamentation, where she receives the body of her dead son. Until the thirteenth century, representations of the crucifixion scene predominated. They showed stylised figures of the Virgin and St. John standing on either side of the cross against a plain or gilded background. A tilting of the head, hand-wringing, or gestures of anguish and a sorrowful expression lent emotion to the scene, but it was a contained grief – the participants stood erect emphasizing the dignity of the response (fig.246).<sup>16</sup> Thirteenth-century preaching, however, began to recognise Christ’s human suffering and increasingly explored Mary’s own experience. The *Stabat Mater Dolorosa*, a

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<sup>15</sup> Perlove and Silver identify the crown of thorns, the nails and the cross as relics and therefore as objects of veneration associated with Catholic piety. In his writings Calvin explicitly rejected the honouring of relics and described such practices as superstitious and idolatrous. See Perlove and Silver, 52. For Calvin’s writings on this subject, see John Calvin, *Traité des reliques* (Paris: Nordsud, 1947): 60.

<sup>16</sup> Rubin, *Mother of God*, 243. See also Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, 126.

poem thought to have been written by Innocent III (1160-1216) and set to music by Jacopone da Todi (1230-1306), was a product of this period.<sup>17</sup> It was a hymn which extolled the Virgin's unique place within the Passion story in emotional and elegiac verse and was re-worked in hundreds of versions over the centuries to accommodate various permutations of Marian piety. Art explored these same sentiments. The stoic grief and subdued gestures of Mary at the foot of the cross gave way to displays of unendurable pain. No detail was left to the imagination and Mary's co-suffering with Christ became an example for appropriate imitation. Her grief and that of her supporters became the antithesis of groups of soldiers, tormenters and Jews who began to crowd passion scenes.<sup>18</sup>

At the same time as Mary's presence in group scenes around the cross became more dramatic and more focussed, an iconography developed which acknowledged her unique position within the Passion narrative. Simeon's prophecy in the Gospels had long been taken to refer to Mary's intimate involvement in her son's crucifixion and as a reference to her own death.<sup>19</sup> This gave rise to a particular visualisation of the suffering Virgin, literally as recipient of Simeon's prophecy. She is pictured most often on her own, but sometimes surrounded with vignettes from the passion of her son, with her face suffused with pain. A sword is shown piercing her heart as is seen in the central panel of Dürer's *Seven Sorrows of the Virgin* (fig.247). Sometimes seven swords representing the Seven Sorrows of the Virgin are shown.

Another form of representation shows the Virgin as a solitary figure, often in half or three-quarter length pose, mourning the death of her son. She is grief-stricken, and tears pour from her eyes. Even without the presence of her son or even any reference to Simeon's prophecy, the agony of Christ's death is instantly recognizable in the pain of his mother. There are many examples within the Netherlandish tradition of the Virgin pictured in half length as a *Mater Dolorosa* but without the instruments of the Passion. The many copies from Dieric Bouts' workshop of the suffering Virgin show her alone and unadorned. The cause of her suffering, her son as the 'Man of Sorrows', is painted as a separate work, a pendant painting made to hang beside that of his mother (fig.248). The particular intimacy between the Virgin and her son and the

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<sup>17</sup> Rubin, *Mother of God*, 244-245. See also Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, 125-128.

<sup>18</sup> Rubin, 247.

<sup>19</sup> Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, 126.

pain, and grief she suffered on her son's account made her the chief indicator of Christ's pain and that shared suffering was offered as an example for emulation.<sup>20</sup>

## A question of theology

The tradition which shows the Virgin Mary as the Mother of Sorrows contemplating the death of her son has what Pelikan describes as a “co-relative doctrine of Mary as Mediatrix.”<sup>21</sup> Amongst a multitude of appellations which had, through the early centuries, extolled the virtues of the Mother of God, a title from Eastern theology rose to prominence in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Mary was described as “the Mediatrix of law and grace”, a title which summarised her twofold function: it was through her humanity that Christ came into the world as a Jew and subject to the Jewish Law, and it is through her that humanity will be returned to him through grace.<sup>22</sup> Mary was acclaimed second in dignity only to the son of God himself, who had assumed human form through her, and the grounds for this dignity was her participation in the history of redemption.<sup>23</sup> As Pelikan puts it, there was a close correlation between the subjectivity of the devotion to Mary and the objectivity of the doctrine of Mary as Mediatrix.<sup>24</sup> It is hardly surprising that Mary's role as intercessor was being clarified within the theology of the Catholic Church at the same time as the literary form and devotional motif of the *Mater Dolorosa* was being asserted in art.<sup>25</sup>

Thirteenth-century theological discourse was supported by and in dialogue with societal mores and pious practice. Ellington shows that at that time the giving and expectation of gifts and favours accounted for much social and commercial intercourse both in Europe and in the East. The pervasiveness of such practices within all levels of society helps to explain, she says, why the Church would be disposed to interpret the work of the Virgin and the saints in terms of the exchange of favours.<sup>26</sup> An expectation of heavenly favours of course depended on a belief that the Virgin herself was in heaven and was able to communicate such requests to her son. Luther initially believed this, but in 1544 he declared the feast of the Assumption to be “thoroughly Papist”. He still believed Mary to be in heaven, but whether she was in

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<sup>20</sup> Rubin, *Mother of God*, 244, 246.

<sup>21</sup> Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, 125.

<sup>22</sup> Pelikan, 131.

<sup>23</sup> Pelikan, 134.

<sup>24</sup> Pelikan, 136.

<sup>25</sup> Pelikan, 125-126.

<sup>26</sup> Ellington, *From Sacred Body to Angelic Soul*, 115-117.

heaven in her physical body or outside her body he did not know since scripture was silent on this point.<sup>27</sup>

Calvin's position is not so easily read. He had no respect for the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception; he believed it unfounded, unsubstantiated in Christian revelation and unscriptural.<sup>28</sup> On the subject of Catholic belief in the Assumption of the Virgin, Calvin chose to allude to that dogma by raising again one of the fundamental questions which underpinned Protestant reform. This was not a matter of theological dispute as much as one of pious devotion and its consequent abuse; it was the Catholic respect for and honouring of sacred relics. Calvin separated himself from belief in the Assumption of the Virgin by re-directing the focus of his criticism onto the Catholics themselves. He declared that "Since they hold that her body is no longer buried, the means to boast of her bones is taken from them." He was quick to turn this to his advantage and to point out that they (the Papists) believed in the Assumption of her body into heaven but still claimed to have various relics of the Virgin, her hair, enormous quantities of her milk and various pieces of her clothing which showed just how stupid their doctrines were.<sup>29</sup>

The idea that Mary might be a heavenly intercessor remained an anathema for the Reformers. As Luther stressed, justification was by faith alone and there should be no speculation about any privileges to be obtained through her. The Virgin was the receiver of God's grace; prayer to Mary or any of the saints was not the Christian way, although he was not averse to the occasional invocation.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, Calvin was relentless in his attacks against Catholic interpretations of the scriptural texts which referred to the Virgin. He speaks of idolaters who make an idol of the Virgin and ascribe to her what belongs to God alone. "God appropriates nothing in Holy Scripture that is not transposed to Mary by the Papists ... those poor baboons who are no more than vermin crawling on the earth."<sup>31</sup>

## Seeking a source

A suggested influence for this particular etching and also for a later painting *The Virgin of Sorrows* (1661) is said to be found in Titian's *Mater Dolorosa* (1553-54)

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<sup>27</sup> Luther quoted in Tavad, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary*, 112-113.

<sup>28</sup> O'Meara, *Mary in Protestant and Catholic Theology*, 131.

<sup>29</sup> John Calvin, *Traité des reliques*, 60.

<sup>30</sup> Tavad, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary*, 114-115.

<sup>31</sup> John Calvin, "Sermon on Luke", *Revue Réformée* 2:15-19; 37, quoted in Tavad, 123.



where the Virgin is pictured half-length looking outwards beyond the picture frame with her hands raised in helpless grief.<sup>32</sup> This picture was widely known through an engraving made by Luca Bertelli (active from 1564-1589).<sup>33</sup> But, according to Wheelock, an even more likely inspiration can be found in an engraving made by Johannes Sadeler (1550-1600) after Maarten de Vos of the *Sorrowing Virgin* (c.1585) (fig.249) which shows a half-length figure against a plain background with her hands held crossed on her chest.<sup>34</sup>

The origins of such depictions, however, lie further back in the visual tradition. Rona Goffen, in her study of Giovanni Bellini's painted Madonnas, notes Bellini's debt to the models of Byzantium with their iconic austerity and isolation and also to their early Venetian counterparts.<sup>35</sup> It is to Bellini (c.1430-1516) that I suggest Rembrandt owes much of his interpretation for this etching. Rembrandt's access to this artist was probably disseminated through the work of masters such as Raphael and Titian many of whose works were held in his collection.<sup>36</sup> His use of the niche form indicated by the curved wall, his half-length figure and the parapet behind which the Virgin stands are all essential elements of Bellini's iconography.<sup>37</sup> The parapet had been used by Rembrandt earlier as a device in his etched *Self Portrait, Leaning on a Stone Wall* (1639) (fig.250) and his painted *Self Portrait* (c.1640) (fig.251) made in emulation of Titian's *Portrait of a Man* (c.1512) and Raphael's *Portrait of Baldassare Castiglione* (1514-1515) (fig.53). Rembrandt had both seen and copied the latter portrait for himself in 1639.<sup>38</sup> Here he was participating in a much older tradition where the half-length portrait had historical and continuing associations with royal imagery.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> For this suggestion, see Hind, *Rembrandt's Etchings*, 92; Williams, 236; Peter C. Sutton, in Arthur K. Wheelock, *Rembrandt's Late Religious Portraits* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005): 118.

<sup>33</sup> Wheelock and Sutton, *Rembrandt's Late Religious Portraits*, 86.

<sup>34</sup> Wheelock and Sutton, 88.

<sup>35</sup> Rona Goffen, "Icon and Vision in Giovanni Bellini's Half-Length Madonnas", *Art Bulletin* 57 (1975): 487.

<sup>36</sup> See in particular the *Rembrandt Documents*, 369–371, where multiple collections of prints by Raphael and Titian are named.

<sup>37</sup> Goffen, "Icon and Vision", 499.

<sup>38</sup> On 9 April 1639, at the Amsterdam sale of the collection of Lucas van Uffelen Rembrandt both saw and made a sketch of this work. Christopher White and Quentin Buvelot, eds. *Rembrandt by Himself* (London: National Gallery Publications, 1999): 170-171.

<sup>39</sup> Goffen, "Icon and Vision", 494.

This same imagery was also adapted for religious purposes, to enhance the impression of nobility.<sup>40</sup> In *The Virgin with the Instruments of the Passion*, Rembrandt uses the parapet as Bellini does, according to Goffen, as a stylistic device which allowed a closer perspective and a perceived intimacy between the sacred subject and the viewer which are necessary elements in devotional imagery.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, she explains, the parapet acts as a barrier between the worshipper and the divine, a separation which both reinforces the emotional response to the scene yet emphasizes Mary's singular role in the redemption narrative. Goffen notes also the inter-relationship between the motif of parapet and altar. When Bellini places the Christ child standing on the parapet, he evokes at the same time the sacrifice of Christ re-enacted in the Eucharist and the image of the adult Christ dead in the tomb.<sup>42</sup> It is this same conjunction between tomb and altar that I suggest Rembrandt makes.

Williams proposes another source for some of the visual motifs in Rembrandt's later Mater Dolorosa iconography. She sees a Lucas van Leyden engraving *The Virgin with the Rosary c.1489-1533* (fig.252) as a source which Rembrandt may have seen and even owned. While Williams applies these findings to the later *Sorrowing Virgin* (1661), the format, I suggest, appears more closely related to this earlier etching of the *Virgin with the Instruments of the Passion*, than to the later painted work.<sup>43</sup>

The Van Leyden engraving shows the Virgin, her hands folded across her chest, sitting before a table on which is placed a set of rosary beads. The beads are arranged in a double ellipse, the symbol of eternity. Behind the Virgin is a semi-circular wall and above her halo there is a garland of grapes. The grapes here are an obvious allusion to the vine as the tree of life, but they allude also to Christ's suffering and death, the grapes symbolic of the wine that was to become his blood. The grapes are also symbolic of the Old Testament theme of "the grapes of wrath". The reference comes from a passage in Revelations 14: 1-20, which talks about the Day of Judgement in terms of a grape harvest which will be put into a huge winepress, the winepress of God's anger. The motif of the grapes with their symbolic associations suggest that the rosary placed before the Virgin represents the 'sorrowful mysteries' of the rosary, the five decades which meditate on the steps towards Christ's

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<sup>40</sup> Goffen, 496.

<sup>41</sup> Goffen, 499.

<sup>42</sup> Goffen, 501.

<sup>43</sup> Williams, *Rembrandt's Women*, 236.

crucifixion.<sup>44</sup> The engraving then functions as a Mater Dolorosa, the motifs suggesting that the Virgin is contemplating the death of her son. The curved wall behind and the table before her, on which the rosary is placed, has the same ‘altar-like’ quality as the tomb or sarcophagus in Rembrandt’s work on which are placed the instruments of the Passion. Rembrandt places his Virgin in a similar but reversed position; the broken wall behind, however, suggests not the apse-like wall of Van Leyden’s engraving but a naturalistic scene of desolation – a further indication of the mother’s pain.

Benesch links Rembrandt’s *Virgin with the Instruments of the Passion* to two of his (Rembrandt’s) earlier drawings, *Studies of the Mater Dolorosa and Other Mourners c.1633-39* (fig.242) and the *Bust of a Mourning Mary* (fig.253) another half-length drawing made by Rembrandt around 1637. All, he says, refer in type and form to medieval counterparts.<sup>45</sup> Most striking, says Benesch, is the relationship of this particular etching to late medieval French and Netherlandish sculptured groups of the Entombment of Christ where Mary and other Holy Women emerge from behind the sarcophagus either holding the crown of thorns, the ointment jar and the nails, or placing them on the tomb such as is seen in the Burgundian group *The Entombment of Christ* (fig.254).<sup>46</sup>

Rembrandt’s debt cannot be tied to any single tradition for he has drawn from many. His subject relates to generic representations which have evolved from disparate iconographic conventions for the *Mater Dolorosa*. Some visualisations focus on Simeon’s prophecy and show with clinical accuracy the sword of sorrow as an actual sword which physically pierces her heart. These concentrate on Mary’s personal suffering; *her* body is physically damaged by the thrust of a sword. But where symbols of Christ’s passion are shown in relation to the Virgin Mary, they are most often spatially removed. They are placed in the hands of the angels who accompany her, where they are seen as prophetic motifs, a reminder of what has yet to

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<sup>44</sup> The rosary is divided into three sets of five “mysteries”, the Joyful Mysteries, the Sorrowful Mysteries and the Glorious Mysteries. Each mystery is composed of an ‘Our Father’, a decade (ten) ‘Hail Marys’ and a ‘Gloria’. The five Sorrowful Mysteries are:

The Agony in the Garden.  
The Scourging at the Pillar.  
The Crowning with Thorns.  
The Carrying of the Cross.  
The Crucifixion.

<sup>45</sup> Benesch, *Collected Writings*, 151.

<sup>46</sup> Benesch, 151.

be accomplished; or they are shown in association with the body of Christ himself placed in his mother's arms.

In the Buxtehude Altarpiece, *Angels Showing Christ the Instruments of the Passion*, c.1450 (fig.255), for instance, angels carrying the crown of thorns and the nails, the cross and the gall-sop, are shown visiting the Christ Child and his mother. Only the curious Christ Child appears to notice their presence. The Virgin continues to knit, in the round, on a surprisingly modern-looking set of four knitting needles, the seamless garment which Christ was to wear at his trial and crucifixion and which was later shared out after his death on the cross (Matthew, 27: 36, Luke 23:34).<sup>47</sup> This garment itself would become one of the identifiable, visual motifs for the Passion. Behind the Virgin, apples fall from a tree, a reminder of her role as the 'New Eve'.

The instruments are displayed more formally in a popular fifteenth-century icon, *Mother of Perpetual Help* (fig.256), where they are held by two angels. The archangels are seen in the upper corners of the work. Michael to the left is holding the lance and the gall-sop and Gabriel to the right holds the cross and nails. Again, the instruments are sometimes pictured as exhibits surrounding the Virgin as she holds her son in her arms. In Hans Memling's *The Man of Sorrows in the Arms of the Virgin*, 1475 (fig.257), the background is filled with symbolism: fragments of people, gestures and instruments involved in the Crucifixion of Christ.

Although the instruments of the Passion are shown in some representations of the *Mater Dolorosa*, more common depictions of the subject concentrate on the Virgin's own sorrow – the Virgin is pictured either wringing her hands, clasping her hands in prayer or with her hands raised in anguish, supported by companions exhibiting similar gestures of grief (fig.258). Rembrandt absorbs both strands of this visual tradition by placing the Virgin alone with the instruments of Crucifixion, her left hand raised in a gesture which can be interpreted as shock, grief or even resignation. Or, she may even be calling for silence while her right hand indicates the nails, the crown and the shroud and allows them to speak for themselves. The meaning of this work appears to lie in an interpretation of these gestures.

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<sup>47</sup> Matthew and Luke's accounts are virtually the same: "Then they cast lots to share out his clothing". Matthew 27: 37, Luke 23:34.

## The 'Art of Gesture'

Rembrandt was following a long and learned tradition in his use of gesture which found its Renaissance voice in Baldassarre Castiglione's *Il Libro del Cortegiano*.<sup>48</sup> The notion of an indefinable grace attached itself to the gestures and habits of courtiers. Deportment, since antiquity, had been seen as a way of exhibiting the moral and social self.<sup>49</sup> The notion of cultivating and fashioning the body to display status and/or an internal moral order (*sprezzatura*) was a Renaissance innovation.<sup>50</sup> An art of civility which could be inbred or socially acquired marked the difference between those who had wealth and societal importance and those who had not. Such fashioning found an audience within the Dutch elite and the visual culture which immortalised their place in the world.<sup>51</sup>

The importance of such fashioning would have been learnt by Rembrandt at an early age. Rhetoric and the language of gesture was part of the scholastic vocabulary within the Dutch Republic of his time. Latin schools, such as that attended by Rembrandt himself in Leiden, required knowledge of rhetoric. The *Schoolordre* issued in 1625 for all Latin schools in the province of Holland made the reading of Vossius' *Elementa Rhetorica* and his *Rhetorices contractae* required reading.<sup>52</sup> Instructions for the right presentation of important personages found their way into artists' manuals. Karel van Mander's famous *Schilderboeck* (1618), referred to the *Cortegiano* and Van Mander may have owned a copy of it.<sup>53</sup> That Rembrandt was well-versed in the art of gesture is obvious in his many portraits of notable people of his time.

The art of the gesture as a public statement of social standing, however, differed from the gesture that expressed emotional intent.<sup>54</sup> Rembrandt would have learnt the importance of body language and gesture in painting portraits and he would have been aware of their potency as an expressive device. By exhibiting the emotions of the

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<sup>48</sup> Baldassarre Castiglione, *Il Cortegiano*, a cura di Ettore Bonora, Milano: U. Mursia editore, 1988.

<sup>49</sup> Herman Roodenburg, *The Eloquence of the Body: Perspectives on Gesture in the Dutch Republic*, (Zwolle: Waanders, 2004): 11.

<sup>50</sup> Roodenburg, *The Eloquence of the Body*, 11.

<sup>51</sup> Roodenburg, 10-11.

<sup>52</sup> Roodenburg, 116.

<sup>53</sup> Roodenburg, 41.

<sup>54</sup> Peter Burke records an increasing interest in gestures from c.1500 to c.1800. It was an interest not only in the psychology of gestures as outward signs of hidden emotions but also in the way they varied from one domain to the other. Within the family, the court and the church distinguishable, and differentiating, patterns emerged. Peter Burke, "The Language of Gesture in Early Modern Italy" in *Varieties of Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 73-75.

subject, some gestures encouraged a reactive response from the viewer. The importance of such an anticipated response is recognised in the few words that Rembrandt records on the subject of his own art. He gives as an excuse for the late delivery of works from the Passion series, the need to execute these works with “die meeste ende die naetuerelste beweeghelickeit” (the greatest and most natural movement, or, the most innate emotion).<sup>55</sup>

Rembrandt captures the attention with what is recognised as the raised ‘speaking hand’ or in some cases, as the ‘announcing hand’. This is a gesture which comes from Roman times. The emperor “would start his *adlocutio* by raising his right hand ... requesting quiet and attention.”<sup>56</sup> What counted in *adlocutio* presentations, explains Moshe Barasch, was the idea of speech itself, the hand replaced the voice.<sup>57</sup> Using the example of Giotto’s *Zacharias in the Temple*, Barasch describes the ‘announcing hand’ (fig.259). Here “the hand is in an almost vertical position the palm slightly turned towards the beholder, all the fingers are seen.” A variation of the gesture is seen “in profile, thumb and index finger are fully exposed and sharply illuminated, the two smaller fingers slightly curved towards the palm.”<sup>58</sup> The hand is recognised as speaking because the lips of the protagonist are tightly closed.<sup>59</sup> In Giotto’s use of such a gesture Barasch identifies a visual motif which indicates the making of “solemn announcements”.<sup>60</sup>

The gesture of the raised ‘announcing’ hand is re-interpreted in Michael Baxandall’s examination of gesture in fifteenth-century Italian art. As an element of annunciation iconography it is applied both to the Virgin herself and to the announcing angel. Filippo Lippi’s *The Annunciation* 1440-60 shows the Virgin’s hands held in identical positions to those of Rembrandt’s etching but in reverse: her right hand is held extended, flat and in profile, her left is raised, open handed in the vertical position (fig.260). This gesture is identified as one of *conturbatio* (disquiet).<sup>61</sup> This same gesture is seen further and perhaps more relevantly, in Antonello da Messina’s *Virgin Annunciate*, c.1475 (fig.261). The Virgin is pictured half-length

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<sup>55</sup> Rembrandt van Rijn, *Seven Letters by Rembrandt* (Third Letter), ed. Isabella van Eeghen, trans. Yda D. Ovink (The Hague: L. J. C. Bouchier, 1961): 38.

<sup>56</sup> Barasch, *Giotto and the Language of Gesture* 17.

<sup>57</sup> Barasch, 17.

<sup>58</sup> Barasch, 22-24.

<sup>59</sup> Barasch, 24.

<sup>60</sup> Barasch, 22.

<sup>61</sup> Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). 51.

behind a lectern, her hand raised in response to the summons from the unseen angel. But that same gesture is as often seen summoned by the announcing angel rather than the Virgin herself. It is shown in a drawing now attributed to a pupil from Rembrandt's workshop and evidently corrected by Rembrandt himself, *The Annunciation* c.1650 (fig.262).

## Interpreting the iconography

Rembrandt has absorbed both motifs, the *adlocutio* hand raised and open-palmed, and the firmly-closed mouth. The gesture in his *Virgin with the Instruments of the Passion* could also be interpreted as an annunciation – the Virgin is announcing to the viewer that her son is dead. The raised right hand at the same time requests 'quiet and attention' and expresses the annunciation gesture of *conturbatio*, or disquiet, both of which are apposite to this particular subject. The left hand of the Virgin is, however, stretched out, fingers extended, over the loosely-arranged cloth, probably the shroud. This is both a symbolic and a liturgical gesture. It is the gesture of imposition, of the laying on of hands and it is one generally reserved for the priesthood. It is a symbolic and formal method of conferring a blessing or some authority. The sacraments of Confirmation and Priesthood are both conferred by the laying on of hands.<sup>62</sup>

Ellington points out that theologians and preachers of the late sixteenth century were generally inclined to read Mary's role in the Passion in priestly language, "as though she was making a priestly offering."<sup>63</sup> Laurence of Brindisi (1559-1619) describes Mary as a "spiritual priest." Mary had already offered her son to God at the Presentation; she was prepared to offer the loss of that son in order to fulfil the will of God and to save humanity from the curse of sin.<sup>64</sup> It is this 'priestly' role which can be recognised in this work. The raised right hand and the imposed left hand display both Mary's agony and the instruments of its inception, the nails and the crown of her dead son and the eucharistic quality of her own sacrifice. What sets this etching apart within Rembrandt's *oeuvre* is his evocation of this symbolic ritual. It is both liturgical and sacramental and would have been recognised by the viewer as such. The stone

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<sup>62</sup> See Patrick Morrisoe, "Imposition of Hands" in *Catholic Encyclopaedia*, Vol.7. (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910).

<sup>63</sup> Ellington, 197.

<sup>64</sup> Laurence of Brindisi, *Opera Omnia*, 1:524, 186. Quoted in Ellington, 197.

slab becomes the altar while the instruments set out on the surface take the place of the bread and wine.

Titian's *Mater Dolorosa* displays a similar stance but it does not evoke the same sense of ritual. Here, also in a half-figure format, Titian shows a mourning virgin, both hands raised in a position traditionally reserved for registering shock and anguish in one of the other mourners. According to Münz, this is the first time this gesture is seen in relation to the mourning Virgin herself.<sup>65</sup> There is no background detail; her eyes appear fixed, looking low down and outside the picture plane. The viewer is left in no doubt about the focus of her gaze; it is on the absent body of her son. The subject is simply expressed, only the gesture of the raised hands appears to differ from similar expressions of grief seen in other works of this nature.

In Rembrandt's work there is a similarity in gesture but he gives some background detail. The broken edge of a high curved stone wall with a subtle indication of greenery appears to situate the Virgin in an outdoor setting but it is an ambiguous space. She could be at the entrance to an enclosed area, the surface before her could then be interpreted not as a tomb or sarcophagus but a pediment or a balustrade. Even the light is difficult to assess. There appear to be two sources, one which illuminates the background, the other appearing to come from further forward lighting the face, chest and hands of the Virgin, but it has a diminished quality, carefully nuanced to suggest an atmosphere of pathos.

This is an image for contemplation. The viewer contemplates the Virgin contemplating; Mary models for the viewer what their response should be. The Virgin's gaze is directed to the right, past the shadowed intimation of a tomb opening and seemingly beyond the picture plane itself. Benesch suggests that "as her look wanders to the right we supplement our thoughts with a half-length of the man of sorrows."<sup>66</sup> She stares almost unseeingly into the distance, her hands poised as if to recognise not the body of her son but to indicate the implements which contributed to his death, as if contemplating the enormity of the act itself.

The emotion behind such display, I suggest, accords with representations made by Dürer in the late fifteenth century and the early sixteenth century of Christ as the Man of Sorrows. In his painted work *Christ as the Man of Sorrows*, 1493 (fig.263), Dürer shows Christ appearing deeply grieved, almost bewildered as he sits, or perhaps

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<sup>65</sup> Ludwig Münz, *Rembrandt's Etchings* (London: Phaidon, 1952):107.

<sup>66</sup> Otto Benesch, *Rembrandt as a Draftsman* (London: Phaidon, 1960): 151.



stands, one knee raised, before a sarcophagus. He supports with his left hand, the birch brush and the *flagellum*. His right hand supports his inclined head still crowned with thorns. Behind, a tomb-shaped mandorla encloses him. The surface of the facing wall is etched with a stippled pattern of birds and foliage. Another etching made in 1522 (fig.264) repeats these motifs in different form. There is the same pain, the same sense of betrayal.

An identification with the expressive values found in Dürer's work is noted by Benesch. He sees this particularly in Rembrandt's work from the 1650s, not so much in his use of individual motifs but in the spirit and mood of his compositions.<sup>67</sup> The lines and strokes of Rembrandt's later etching style, he says, are not abbreviations or atmospheric intervals but the "spiritual quintessence of an experience rooted deep in nature – even if it has been seen with the inner eye alone."<sup>68</sup> Ernst van der Wetering notes that Rembrandt's later works are characterized by a "remarkable stillness", the near absence of movement, he says, gives nevertheless the impression that the image is not frozen but is potentially dynamic.<sup>69</sup> Rembrandt's etching echoes the emotional content of Dürer's work; he too gives a sense of inner conflict. He borrows some of Dürer's motifs: he uses the sarcophagus, he includes rudimentary natural forms in the background and there is an area of heavy hatching to the right - a suggestion of a darker tomb opening.

## An alternative identification

Rembrandt's iconography and his use of gesture in this work open the possibility of another reading of this etching. Returning to the biblical account of the death and resurrection of Christ, we find that the Virgin Mary is not located at any time at or near the tomb. Mary's involvement with the scene of Christ's death is limited in the biblical account from John's Gospel, to her presence at the foot of the cross. Only John's Gospel speaks of her presence at that scene where she is placed together with her sister Mary, the wife of Clophas, and Mary of Magdala (John 19: 25-27). She is not mentioned again until the Acts of the Apostles includes her as one of disciples gathered in Jerusalem in the upper room of the house in which they were staying, after

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<sup>67</sup> Benesch, *Collected Writings: Rembrandt* Vol. 1, 91.

<sup>68</sup> Benesch, Vol. 1, 92.

<sup>69</sup> Ernst van der Wetering "Rembrandt: A Biography" in Lene Bógh Rónberg and Eva de la Fuente Pedersen, *Rembrandt? The Master and his Workshop* (Copenhagen: Statens Museum for Kunst, 2006): 45.

the death of Christ (Acts 1: 12-14). It is Mary of Magdala who is named as being present at the tomb.

The gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, all tell much the same story, it was Mary Magdalene and ‘the other Mary’ (not identified by scholars as the Virgin Mary) who returned to the sepulchre and found the body of the Lord was gone, and it is she who alerts the apostles to this fact.<sup>70</sup> The apostle John gives the most detailed account. He tells of Mary of Magdala’s discovery of the empty tomb, of her desolation, and of her running to fetch Simon Peter who entered the tomb and found the wrapping cloths on the ground.<sup>71</sup> There are several motifs in Rembrandt’s etching that suggest that the subject of this work could be identified not as the Virgin Mary but as Mary Magdalene.

Read in relation to his earlier painting of *Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalene* 1638 (fig.265), Rembrandt’s etching shows that there are certain elements held in common. The painted scene also takes place outside, before the darkness of the tomb; Mary Magdalene holds a cloth in her left hand while her right hand is raised in shock. If the gesture of the raised hand in Rembrandt’s etching indicates annunciation typology, then what is being announced here is the disappearance of Christ’s physical body, which in turn announces his resurrection from the dead. It is Mary Magdalene who made this proclamation. If, as I have suggested earlier, the figure of the standing woman at the foot of the bed in Rembrandt’s etching *Death of the Virgin* could be read as Mary Magdalene, there are other visual links which could be made to support this identification. Both the women are heavily veiled; both wear short capes over long garments which in both cases are embroidered. Benesch and Gilboa have made the suggestion that there is a pot of ointment together with the nails, crown and shroud placed on top of the tomb.<sup>72</sup> If correct, this would further suggest an interpretation of the figure as that of Mary Magdalene, since the jar of ointment is the motif by which she is identified in the visual tradition. From a scriptural perspective, it is Mary Magdalene who is placed in the closest relationship to the events which happened around the tomb and it is she who should be seen in this role.

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<sup>70</sup> Matthew speaks of Mary and the ‘other Mary’ returning to the sepulchre Mt. 28: 1-2. Mark names Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome Mk. 16: 1-2 and Luke names Mary of Magdala, Joanna and Mary the mother of James (Luke 24: 9-10).

<sup>71</sup> John 20:1-2. In John’s account, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb alone and on finding it empty she ran back to Simon Peter and the other disciple.

<sup>72</sup> Gilboa, *Images of the Feminine*, 64. Benesch, *Collected Writings*, 151.

## Conclusion

The possibility that the subject of this etching may be Mary Magdalene rather than the Virgin herself is an interesting diversion which accommodates speculation about the Magdalene's role within the Passion narrative, indeed within the Gospel narratives themselves. However, such identification is unsupported by any substantial evidence. Even if the jar of ointment was visible, which it is not, this would not preclude the figure representing the Virgin Mary. Rembrandt's representation fits easily into a recognisable visual tradition which focuses on the sorrow of the Virgin. This is a *Mater Dolorosa* for Rembrandt adopts motifs – the instruments of the Passion, the shroud, the tomb, objects which are a part of a long visual history typically associated with this genre.

The representation of the Virgin Mary in this etching is one that reacts to a typically Catholic devotion, a respect for and honouring of the Virgin in her role as suffering mother. Rembrandt appears to have found his inspiration in both Italian and Northern sources, but he takes his interpretation further. He draws on the language of gesture to invest his subject with a deep significance. Here the gestures speak. A sense of religious ritual is invoked. The objects have a connection with Christ's passion and death; they stand in place of bread and wine on a tomb altar with the Virgin in place of the priest.<sup>73</sup> This suggests an underlying knowledge not only of the gesture itself but of the liturgy and theology behind it. The Virgin is not shown with her hands wrung in helpless sorrow or clasped in prayer, passively accepting her role; she is actively involved in an all but sacramental act which would have been seen and recognised by Rembrandt's Catholic patrons as recalling the sacrifice of the Mass.

Such reference to symbolic ritual and an obvious inclusion of motifs which identify the subject as the Virgin Mary are missing from Rembrandt's two later paintings perceived as representations of the *Mater Dolorosa*. These two works appear to rely entirely on an interpretation of expression and gesture for their identification. Wheelock notes Walter Liedtke's suggestion that the last portrait Rembrandt painted of his companion Hendrickje Stoffels, *Hendrickje Stoffels (as the Sorrowing Virgin?)* should be considered as one in which she assumes the guise of a

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<sup>73</sup> For an explanation on how symbols work in relation to the sacraments, see, Mervyn J. Duffy, *How Language, Ritual and Sacraments Work* (Roma: Editrice Pontificia Universita Gregoriana, 2005): 172.

biblical figure.<sup>74</sup> Wheelock himself speculates that the identity of this subject is that of the Sorrowing Virgin. He states that the placement of her hand at her chest and her heavy body language convey sadness, as if she is trying to contain within herself some deep sorrow. He suggests a Titian prototype again, probably Titian's *Mater Dolorosa* 1554.<sup>75</sup> Apart from this assumed reference to Titian's work and a sad expression, there seems nothing to intimate this subject might be a *Mater Dolorosa*.

The identification of the later painted *Virgin of Sorrows* (1661), I suggest, also remains speculative. It was a work that was originally catalogued in 1778 as a "woman with chaplet" and in 1793 as an "old devotee". Subsequently the subject was identified as an "old nun". It was not until the last century that Valentiner suggested that the painting represents the *Mater Dolorosa*.<sup>76</sup> This recognition is now substantiated by a perceived relationship to the series of paintings of saints and apostles made by Rembrandt at this time. Williams links this painting to the iconography of the Van Leyden print *The Virgin with the Rosary* c.1520. The rosary she is seen carrying is said to be a feature of *Mater Dolorosa* iconography.<sup>77</sup> As she notes, however, there is some concern as to whether the rosary in the *Virgin of Sorrows* (1661), was a later addition since it is largely painted on a strip of canvas added later to the bottom of the painting. She further identifies the downcast eyes and the dress as bearing a close comparison to those of the Virgin in the *Virgin with the Instruments of the Passion*.<sup>78</sup>

Instances of the Virgin's presence in groups around the cross could be easily absorbed into Protestant teaching as the fulfilment of her role as the human mother. She is present as a subsidiary figure in a history painting which records a biblical event. But Rembrandt embraces a particularly Catholic motif in *Virgin with the Instruments of the Passion*. He draws the Virgin out of the crowd and pictures her as a solitary figure emotionally involved in the drama of Christ's death. Her sorrow evokes a reaction from the viewer, drawing them to the suffering figure in a recognition which is both human and empathetic.

Perlove and Silver's proposal, that the absence of a halo on the Virgin Mary and the fact that she does not "adore the relics" placed before her shows that Rembrandt

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<sup>74</sup> These works have never been documented as portraits of Hendrickje Stoffels. Their identification as such remains theoretical.

<sup>75</sup> Wheelock and Sutton, *Rembrandt's Late Religious Portraits*, 86-88.

<sup>76</sup> Peter J. Sutton in Wheelock and Sutton, 118.

<sup>77</sup> Sutton, 116-120. See also Williams, *Rembrandt's Women*, 236.

<sup>78</sup> Williams, 236.

was adapting the iconography for a Protestant audience, cannot be substantiated through a study of the tradition.<sup>79</sup> The halo is most often not included in depictions of the sorrowing Virgin. As has been shown, Bouts, Van der Goes, Titian and Messina, as examples, all omit the halo. Where the instruments of the passion are shown in connection with the Virgin they are either placed as accompanying symbols (as they are in this work) or carried by angels as prophetic visualizations of what lies ahead for her son. To suggest that in these particular circumstances the Virgin might “adore the relics” is to misunderstand both the theology of the Virgin herself and the place of relics within the religious life of the Catholic Church.

There is no formal biblical sanction for this etching, only an extrapolation of biblical text which has allowed artistic imagination to illuminate the story of Christ’s passion and death in terms of human engagement. This image made for contemplation appears conceived in a format that encouraged pious fervour. Its small size (11 cm x 8.9 cm) suggests the dimensions of a ‘holy card’, a picture made for private and intimate piety, small enough to slip into a book or Bible. Here, again, Rembrandt immerses himself in a tradition which is not only Catholic but one that was strongly opposed by Reformed doctrine. Such a depiction of the Virgin, through its size, its subject and the particular way in which Rembrandt has recorded this event, makes this an image which invites an interpretation of Mary as the Mediatrix, the suffering Virgin who, understanding our pain and recognising our needs, can translate those needs to her son.

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<sup>79</sup> Perlove and Silver, *Rembrandt’s Faith*, 52.

## *Virgin and Child with Cat and Snake, 1654.*

### Introduction

A final etching for consideration in this study, *The Virgin and Child with Cat and Snake* (fig.266), is perhaps the most complex of Rembrandt's Marian works. It was executed in the year 1654 as one of a group of six etchings depicting scenes from the childhood of Christ. Five subjects from the series, all made in 1664, *Adoration of the Shepherds with Lamp* (fig.267), *Circumcision in the Stable* (fig.268), *Flight into Egypt* (fig.269), *Christ Disputing with the Doctors* (fig.270) and *Christ and his Parents Returning from the Temple* (fig.271), have their foundation in the biblical text. The remaining etching from the group, *The Virgin with Cat and Snake*, does not follow any specific passage from the Bible but appears to conflate a series of ideas with both a theological and personal content.

It is not known if Rembrandt intended this series of etchings to form a 'set', but if so, it may have been done in emulation of Dürer's *Life of the Virgin* series (1502-1511) which is seen to provide some inspiration for Rembrandt's Marian etchings.<sup>1</sup> The iconographical connections are, however, tenuous although Rembrandt follows, as Dürer does, five initial events from the early childhood of Christ. The possibility that these etchings might form a series appears to be based more on the fact that they were made in the same year and all but one have similar dimensions (9.5 cm x 14.4 cm). With the exception of *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, all are signed and dated. *The Adoration of the Shepherds* is slightly larger (10.6 cm x 12.9 cm) and is signed but not dated.<sup>2</sup> When all six are taken as a group, *The Virgin and Child with Cat and Snake* manifests difference; yet this etching is arguably one in which Rembrandt follows most closely a definitive Marian typology. Again, as with the *Holy Family* (1635) and the *Virgin and Child in the Clouds*, the representation of this subject fits into the category of Marian iconography known as a 'Virgin of Humility', but the motifs suggest a broader interpretation.

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<sup>1</sup> Williams suggests that these could perhaps have been made in emulation of series of works made by both Dürer and Lucas van Leyden (Williams, *Rembrandt's Women*, 202). White suggests that Rembrandt "produced what were in effect if not intention" a series (White, *Rembrandt as an Etcher* 79). Hind notes also that these works form a series illustrating the childhood of Christ (Hind, *A Catalogue of Rembrandt's Etchings*, 112). Tümpel refers to these works as a "loose series of etchings" (Tümpel, *Images and Metaphors*, 225).

<sup>2</sup> Williams, *Rembrandt's Women*, 202.

The motif of the Virgin of Humility has been discussed in earlier chapters. Meiss explains that representations of the Virgin which emphasized her humble status gained wide popularity because they depicted an accessible Virgin with whom the viewer could form a direct, intimate and sympathetic relationship.<sup>3</sup> In all cases where Rembrandt depicts the Virgin Mary, he presents her not as a distanced and glorified figure but as personal, accessible and profoundly human, an approach which has led many, most recently Perlove and Silver, to recognise an affinity with Protestant belief. Yet despite these humble settings Rembrandt alludes to her greater status. His representation of Mary and her Child at the gates of heaven *Madonna and Child in the Clouds* (1641), or his *Death of the Virgin* (1639), where angels descend from the clouds to welcome her soul, indicate a heavenly realm and Mary's honourable place within it.

Although Rembrandt's artistic influences are generally disparate, with *Virgin and Child with Cat and Snake* he looks to the Italian tradition. His source for the iconography of the central grouping of the Virgin and child can be directly attributed to the work of the Italian artist Andrea Mantegna (1451-1506) which in turn owes its inspiration to a marble relief by Donatello (c.1386-1466).<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Broos' extensive enquiry into formal sources for this work suggests no other influence.<sup>5</sup> Rembrandt's emulation of Mantegna's work, however, is absorbed into a complex patterning of motifs which acknowledge a much wider Mariology.

## The critics

Mantegna's engraving *Virgin and Child* (1490) (fig.272) has been universally accepted as the model for the central figures in Rembrandt's *Virgin and Child with Cat and Snake*. The resemblance is so close that Christopher White describes the debt as 'almost verbatim', although Rembrandt has softened and simplified the drapery and adopted a slightly higher viewpoint, making Mantegna's aggressively sculptural concept into a more human and harmonious painterly image.<sup>6</sup> Clark states that this engraving was among the works Rembrandt would have owned and that Rembrandt

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<sup>3</sup> Meiss, "The Madonna of Humility", 453.

<sup>4</sup> A. Hyatt Mayor, "Rembrandt and the Bible", *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 36: 3 (1978-79): 15.

<sup>5</sup> Broos lists the opinion of thirty experts all of whom suggest Mantegna as Rembrandt's source. See *Index into the Formal Sources of Rembrandt's Art*, 76.

<sup>6</sup> White, *Rembrandt as an Etcher*, 74.

“did not want to vary the pose”, changing only Mary’s dress to contemporary attire and placing Joseph outside a window.<sup>7</sup> Schwartz presumes that, since it is known that Rembrandt owned “t kostelijke boeck van Andre de Mantaingie” (the precious book of Andrea Mantegna), this engraving would have been included with these works.<sup>8</sup> Although it is highly likely that Rembrandt borrowed from Mantegna’s etching, again, it is not known with certainty that this particular print was contained in this book. Williams points out that the ‘precious book’ might have contained a series of woodcuts made after Mantegna’s *Triumphs of Caesar*.<sup>9</sup> It is known that Rembrandt made a copy of Mantegna’s drawing, *The Calumny of Apelles* (c.1504-06), from this series around this same time.<sup>10</sup> Rembrandt’s copy is unsigned and undated but is variously described as having been made in c.1654 (White) or c.1656 (Schwartz).<sup>11</sup>

The similarity to Mantegna’s engraving of the Virgin is also noted by Arthur Hind. He suggests, however, that a careful study of the Rembrandt etching held at the British Museum (L., 114), shows that it appears to have been made at a considerably earlier date although he gives no reason for this observation.<sup>12</sup> This could indicate that this etching was not originally part of the series, which may account for the distinctive subject matter. The fact that the etching is signed and dated, *Rembrandt* 1654, makes this unlikely. However, it is technically possible for Rembrandt to have made the plate earlier and to have added his signature and the date at a later stage, although there is no precedent for Rembrandt having done this. Hind’s suggestion does not seem to have attracted any further attention, possibly because of the inscribed date and a lack of interest in the work itself.

A sustained study of this etching does not appear to have been made. Discussion has been limited to brief descriptions in monographs or catalogues of Rembrandt’s works. Slive notes only that this etching does not depict a specific passage in the

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<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Clark, *An Introduction to Rembrandt* (Devon: John Murray, 1978): 97.

The decisive view on Rembrandt’s emulation of this particular work by Andrea Mantegna was made by Cornelis Hofstede de Groot in an article in *De Nederlandsche Spectator* (1893), in which he listed all the pictorial examples he was aware of in which Rembrandt had imitated another’s work. No one has ever doubted that this was the source of Rembrandt’s inspiration. See Bob van den Boogert, ed. *Rembrandt’s Treasures* (Zwolle: Waanders, 1999): 139.

<sup>8</sup> Item no. 200 in Rembrandt’s inventory (1656). *Rembrandt Documents*, 370; Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book*, 30.

<sup>9</sup> Williams, *Rembrandt’s Women*, 201.

<sup>10</sup> White, *Rembrandt as an Etcher*, 80. This drawing is held at the British Museum, Ben. 1207. See also Kenneth Clark, *Rembrandt and the Italian Renaissance* (London: John Murray, 1966): 146-150.

<sup>11</sup> White, 80; Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book*, 30.

<sup>12</sup> Hind, *A Catalogue of Rembrandt’s Etchings*, 112.



Bible.<sup>13</sup> White and Boon give technical details such as an aberration where two white spaces appear on the upper margin.<sup>14</sup> Others provide short analyses. Williams, for instance, notes the basic iconography and the association of the snake motif with a medieval typology which connects Old Testament themes with those of the New Testament; in this case she makes the obvious connection between the Virgin and the first woman, Eve. She suggests this scene is one of quiet intimacy and that Rembrandt does not detract from that intimacy by overloading it with doctrinal symbols.<sup>15</sup>

Conversely Clifford Ackley sees this etching as alive with religious symbolism. He interprets what he identifies as this ‘Catholic’ imagery as an “extraordinary combination” of everyday life and of traditional symbolism associated with the cult of the Virgin. He interprets the Virgin of Humility position of the Virgin and the presence of the snake again as indicative of Mary’s role as redeeming the sin of Eve. He notes also the window-halo which frames the Virgin and Joseph’s exclusion behind the pane of glass.<sup>16</sup>

Perlove and Silver give the broadest critique. They recognise the fictive curtain as a motif in Rembrandt’s paintings of the Holy Family, aligning it with his Kassel *Holy Family* (1646), where it serves as an analogy for Christ who lifts the veil from the Old Testament. They also note the presence of the snake as symbolic of Mary’s redemption of the sin of Eve. Rembrandt’s interest in this theme, they hypothesise, could come from a contemporaneous interest in Jewish themes, the two etchings of Christ among the doctors in the Temple – *Christ Disputing with the Doctors* (1652) and *Christ Disputing with the Doctors* (1654).<sup>17</sup> They interpret Joseph’s presence in *The Virgin with Cat and Snake* as the “embodiment of Jewish adherents” which, they claim, accounts for Rembrandt’s separation of Joseph from the Virgin and Child.<sup>18</sup>

Only Gilboa acknowledges the iconographic motif of the snake as, not only an identification of Mary as the New Eve, but also as an image consistent with Counter-Reformation understanding of the Immaculate Conception. She suggests Rembrandt’s possible emulation of a Caravaggio painting *Madonna with a Snake* (*Palafrenieri*

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<sup>13</sup> Slive, *The Complete Etchings of Rembrandt*, B63.

<sup>14</sup> White, B63, 32.

<sup>15</sup> Williams, *Rembrandt’s Women*, 201.

<sup>16</sup> Ackley, *Rembrandt’s Journey*, 243-244.

<sup>17</sup> Perlove and Silver, *Rembrandt’s Faith*, 232, 238.

<sup>18</sup> Perlove and Silver, 181-183.

*Madonna*) (1605-6) (fig.273).<sup>19</sup> Within the context of his contemporary social and political society Rembrandt's choice of such a religiously disputatious motif gives some indication of his awareness of current Catholic theology. As I will argue, the presence of a snake in this work references two singularly Catholic beliefs, those of Mary as the New Eve and her own Immaculate Conception.

## History of the image

The snake as an adjunct to visualizations of the Virgin Mary has its roots in Catholic theology, since it both formulates the parallel between Eve, the first woman and Mary, the Mother of God. As Gilboa rightly observes, it was also a Counter-Reformation motif which identified the Virgin as the Immaculate Conception. While most scholars identify this motif as a reference to the Virgin Mary as the New Eve, there has been no attempt to examine the possibilities that presents. There is, however, a general recognition that the inclusion of a snake within a scene of obvious domesticity changes the atmosphere and interpretation of this etching. White, for example, limits his observations to this level. He suggests only that this is an intimate genre scene "intensely expressive of a Mother's love for her son", but it is more than that.<sup>20</sup> Rembrandt's etching *The Virgin with Cat and Snake* has no direct precedent within the visual tradition. It borrows elements from several Marian tropes. Most obviously, it incorporates the theme of the Madonna of Humility.

Because the belief in the Virgin's own Immaculate Conception frames her appearance in both doctrine and art, she has been referred to under that title in earlier analyses of the *Death of the Virgin* and the *Virgin and Child in the Clouds*. The iconography of this particular etching, however, adopts motifs which refer specifically to that doctrine. The translation of one motif into a representation of another is found in an evolving theology. Here, a brief explanation is helpful.

Justin of Rome (c.100-164) was the first to draw attention to the parallelism between Christ, named in 1 Corinthians 15-45 as the "second Adam", and Mary, who, as both humble and obedient, redeems the first sin and becomes the "new Eve".<sup>21</sup> From the earliest writings of the church fathers, this conjunction has been made. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons (c. 130-200) in his *Against Heresies* writes:

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<sup>19</sup> Gilboa, *Images of the Feminine*, 65.

<sup>20</sup> White, *Rembrandt as an Etcher*, 74.

<sup>21</sup> Tavad, *The Thousand faces of the Virgin Mary*, 59.

And just as it was through a virgin who disobeyed that mankind was stricken and fell and died, so too was it through the Virgin, who obeyed the word of God, that mankind, resuscitated by life, received life.  
And Eve [had necessarily to be restored] through Mary, that a Virgin by becoming the advocate of a virgin should undo and destroy virginal disobedience by virginal obedience.<sup>22</sup>

Ephrem the Syrian (c.303-373) develops the comparison further: “Because the serpent has struck Eve with his claw, the foot of Mary bruised him.”<sup>23</sup> One of the early fathers of the Church, Ambrose of Milan (d. 397), extols the virginity of Mary as the ideal virtue. The virginal birth of her son was a sign of his divinity and he draws out the Eve-Mary parallel between divine motherhood and virginity:

Come then, O Eve, who are now called Mary; you not only received an incentive to virginity but also gave us God.<sup>24</sup>

At this early stage all hinges on Mary’s virginity. In the hands of the exegetes – Justin, Irenaeus, Ephrem and Ambrose – a connecting line was drawn between man’s recognition of nakedness and sins of the flesh. The first sin of disobedience became inexorably identified as sexual sin and Augustine of Hippo (d.430) explains why.

In his *City of God* (1467), a seminal theological text, Augustine developed this connection. He specifies the seemingly natural co-relationship of lust with the first sin of pride. Lust flowed from a recognition of nakedness, for he notes that after Adam and Eve had eaten the forbidden fruit they covered not their hands and their mouths which had done the deed but their genitals. “It is right, therefore to be ashamed of this lust, and it is right that the members it moves or fails to move by its own right ... should be called *pudenda* (parts of shame) which they were not called before man’s sin.” Since a child is not conceived outside a sexual embrace and that necessarily involves passion, Augustine claims, the child is stained from the moment of conception. It is therefore the lustful act of intercourse which introduces sin into the world. What follows is his privileging of chastity above all things. God, he says, therefore chose for his son the “modesty of a Virgin’s womb.”<sup>25</sup> Here, explains Warner, Augustine has tied three ideas in a causal chain, the sinfulness of sex, the

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<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Pelikan, *Mary, Through the Centuries*, 42-43.

<sup>23</sup> Ephrem the Syrian, *Diatessaron* 2, 2; SC 121, 66, quoted in Gambero, 116.

<sup>24</sup> Ambrose of Milan, *De institutione virginis* 33; PL 15, 1663, quoted in Gambero, 192.

<sup>25</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans*, Book XIV. Ch. 18, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Classics, 1984): 578.

virgin birth and the primacy of virginity.<sup>26</sup> It follows that since the son of God must be born of a virgin's womb, the mother herself must be unstained by any carnal coupling.<sup>27</sup> It is to Augustine, therefore, that the first stirrings of a theology of the Immaculate Conception are attributed.<sup>28</sup>

By the Middle Ages, Mary's humility and obedience, the intrinsic merits which provoked the Divine invitation, became an obvious comparison to the pride, disobedience and sinful attraction of Eve. As *The Golden Legend* expresses it:

Eve lent her ear to the serpent, drank the poisonous draft, was entrapped by the pleasures, subjected to the pangs of childbirth and condemned with Adam but this truly blessed woman who lent her ear to God, who bore the husband's mercy in her womb, who conceived without contact with a husband and without pain...<sup>29</sup>

Pride was the worst possible sin; it had caused the fall of Lucifer and his angels, of Adam and Eve and later, of Judas. Preachers continued an ancient tradition in associating Mary's humility with her reversal of Eve's sin.<sup>30</sup> Mary's humility redeemed but somehow so too did her virginity. The sin of pride became translated into the very act which makes possible human existence. Mary's virginal status provided the benchmark for human sanctity. As Pelikan points out, once this dialectic of Eve and Mary was introduced into the vocabulary it took on a life of its own.<sup>31</sup> Thus the Eve-Mary dichotomy became established in theological thought and vocabulary. The Latin word *Eva* is reversed to become the word *Ave*, the first word in the 'Hail Mary' and there appeared to be an almost "mystical Mariological significance in the very name."<sup>32</sup>

Visual associations of Eve with the snake announce the fall of man because Christian iconography recognises the snake as symbolic of man's primal fall from grace. Where the original text (Genesis 3) makes no mention of the sexual act as a

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<sup>26</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, quoted in Warner, 54.

<sup>27</sup> This belief required some explanation of how such a fertilization might take place. The story of Mary's conception is recounted in the apocryphal gospels. In a birth narrative which closely parallels that of Christ himself, *Pseudo-Matthew* tells of the visit of an Angel to Anna to announce that she will conceive. Joachim, as was Joseph, is visited by an angel in the desert to inform him of the imminent event. Joachim and Anna meet chastely at the Golden Gate where conception happens and they return home for the birth of the Virgin. Here the conception appears to have taken place not with the visit of the angel but miraculously when Anna and Joachim came face to face. See Cartlidge and Elliott, 23-34.

<sup>28</sup> Gambero, 226.

<sup>29</sup> *The Golden Legend*, Vol. II, 119.

<sup>30</sup> Ellington, *From Sacred Body to Angelic Soul*, 183.

<sup>31</sup> Pelikan, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary*, 44.

<sup>32</sup> Pelikan, 44.

precursor to man's fall, it does record that mankind's first perception of sin and pride and God's disappointment was made manifest in a recognition of their nakedness: "I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid" (Gen. 3: 11). Warner notes with particular acuity the relationship between Eve's fall and the association of sex with sin and finally, death.<sup>33</sup>

Early visualizations easily made this translation. The nakedness of Adam and Eve made them a familiar theme in art as it legitimized nudity as a subject. The conjunction with a demurely clad virgin emphasised the dichotomy. An illustration in the prayer book of a fifteenth-century bishop, Bernhard von Rohr, Archbishop of Salzburg (fig.274), shows a central tree of life with a stricken Adam collapsed at its feet still holding the deadly apple in his hand. To the right a naked Eve plucks apples from the serpent's mouth and feeds them to willing recipients while death watches. To the left the crowned and haloed Virgin stands beneath the cross and plucks hosts from that same tree and feeds them to an equally receptive group as an angel watches.

Where these medieval visualizations showed Mary as a corresponding figure to the fallen Eve, it was not until the end of the Middle Ages and following the Counter-Reformation that the iconography of the Immaculate Conception finally evolved. Both events, Eve's fall and Mary's triumph, became subsumed into a single image of the Virgin, demonstrably humble and therefore virtuous, standing alone. She was shown, usually looking downwards, with either the globe of the earth or the sickle moon of the Virgin of the Apocalypse beneath her feet, as in Velázquez *Immaculate Conception* (1618) (fig.275). Many representations, such as Rubens' *Immaculate Conception* (fig.276), included also the primal serpent writhing beneath her heel.

In a re-interpretation of this older formula where the Virgin is shown alone with the snake beneath her foot, the Christ child joins his mother, as is seen in Caravaggio's *Madonna with Serpent* (Palafrenieri Madonna) (fig.273). Here the foot of the Christ child is placed on top of that of the Virgin as she crushes the serpent's head. Without exception, the child takes a secondary role to that of his mother in this formulation. This motif can be seen in Netherlandish prints of the time notably those of Schelte à Bolswert (1581-1659) and Matthijs Borrekens (1615-70), who, according to Knipping, both took their inspiration from Rubens' *Immaculate Conception*.<sup>34</sup> Caravaggio's *Palafrenieri Madonna* is one of the more challenging images of the

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<sup>33</sup> Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 50-67.

<sup>34</sup> Knipping, *Heaven on Earth*, 249.

theme. It shows a rather less humble Madonna, honoured by a fine line halo yet voluptuous in her pose, as she bends to hold her naked child who places his foot upon hers as she crushes the head of a writhing snake. The diagonal lines of both the child's left leg and his phallus suggest that here too Caravaggio is involving sexuality with the redemptive act.

Rembrandt's adaptation of this theme in *Virgin with Cat and Snake* is not an Immaculate Conception according to accepted iconography. The Virgin is not shown within the heavenly sphere as she is generally positioned in such visualisations. Rembrandt places his Virgin in a domestic setting; he adapts Mantegna's *Virgin of Humility* but inserts influences from contemporary Catholic theological debate which had both political and religious overtones. The imagery of the Immaculate Conception began as a particularly Spanish phenomenon which spread quickly through the Catholic world. As Knipping has shown, despite the post-Spanish Protestantisation of the North, the image was readily available through the numerous reproductions conceived, printed and disseminated within the Dutch Republic itself.<sup>35</sup>

## Doctrinal difficulties

The motif of Mary with the snake beneath her feet was visual exegesis for it displayed pictorially Mary's role in the reversal of evil, but it caused the Reformers a great deal of concern. It not only promoted a specifically Catholic belief, but the iconography on which it relied was derived from a mistranslation of the original text. The tendency among the Latin fathers was to translate Genesis 13: 14-15 with a feminine pronoun. "And the Lord said to the serpent ... I will put enmity between thee and the woman and thy seed and her seed: she (*ipsa*) shall crush thy head and thou shalt lie in wait for her heel."<sup>36</sup> This became a recurring theme in patristic writings and was summed up in the epithet "death through Eve, life through Mary."<sup>37</sup>

Such an interpretation was expressly refuted by Luther. In his *Lectures on Genesis* (1535-1546), the results of a study which filled the last years of his life, Luther railed against the mistranslation of the word *ipsa* which effectively placed Mary in the role of co-redeemer:

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<sup>35</sup> See Knipping *Heaven on Earth*, 244-250; Stratten, *The Immaculate Conception*, 2-4.

<sup>36</sup> Sarah Jane Boss, "Mary in Patristic Theology", in Sarah Jane Boss, ed. *Mary, The Complete Resource* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007): 86.

<sup>37</sup> Boss, 90.

How amazing, how damnable, that through the agency of foolish exegetes Satan has managed to apply this passage which in fullest measure abounds in the comfort of the son of God, to the Virgin Mary, for in all the Latin Bibles the pronoun appears on the feminine gender: “And *she* will crush...”

Luther continues to explain further:

Because Satan sees that Adam is more excellent, he does not dare assail him and I too believe that if he had tempted Adam first the victory would have been Adam's. He would have crushed the serpent with his foot and said “shut up”.<sup>38</sup>

It is now generally accepted that the word *ipsa* has been mistranslated and should be *ipse* which is masculine or neuter. Yet, however the story is reconfigured in theology and in art, the earliest Christian understanding of sexual difference has been seen to be written into the order of creation from the beginning as a hierarchical relationship of male superiority and female subordination.<sup>39</sup> A singular reversal of that role, in which Mary was given the power to reverse the sin of Eve, was written into Marian iconography.

This is not the only time Rembrandt had used this motif. The presence of a snake in another depiction of the Holy Family has apparently remained unnoticed by scholars. In an etching belonging to the same ‘set’, the *Adoration of the Shepherds with a Lamp* (c.1654) (fig.277), there is a snake which emerges from under the edge of the Virgin's gown beside her foot (fig.278). There is a certain feeling of disquiet in this etching. Mary half-lies in the straw with the baby asleep beside her; she holds open her cloak to show the child to the untidy little group of ‘shepherds’ who have just arrived. There is nothing that visually associates this group with shepherds; there are three men, two women and a child who appear more like curious locals than shepherds. Joseph sitting on an up-turned barrow introduces his wife and her son. To the right, two disproportionately large beasts look on from their stall. Rembrandt departs from traditional iconography for this detail – there are two oxen but no ass, neither are there any sheep as are normally associated with such scenes. The Virgin looks both weary and contemplative. The candle on the wall behind gives a soft light which envelops the Virgin and her child and also illuminates the snake emerging from under her gown. There is an intensity of light in the area around the snake made more obvious by the contrast with the darkly-etched barrow on which Joseph sits which

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<sup>38</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, ed. “Lectures on Genesis”, in *Luther's Works*, Vol. 1 (St Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1968): 151.

<sup>39</sup> Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate*, 47-49.

seems to have been introduced, in part, to determine a convincing three-dimensional space.

The depiction of the snake in this etching is unsupported by any accompanying iconography which might account for its presence. It appears inexplicable except as a reminder of Mary's identification as the New Eve. Despite obvious theological difficulties which might have arisen as a result of Rembrandt's appropriation of such Catholic iconography, it is to be wondered if the presence of the snake in these two etchings, both made in the same year and both part of the same 'series', may have had a more personal meaning for Rembrandt himself.

The chronology of these works suggests an answer. 1654 was the year in which Hendrickje Stoffels, Rembrandt's companion, was with child and in June of that year Hendrickje was summoned before the Church Council to answer charges that she was "living in whoredom with the painter Rembrandt [in Hoererij verloopen met Rembrandt de schilder]." <sup>40</sup> In July of that year Hendrickje, five months pregnant, finally appeared before the Council: "Hendrickie Jaghers appeared before the council and has admitted she has lived with Rembrant (sic) like a whore, for which she has been seriously punished, admonished to penitence and banned from the [celebration] of the Lord's Supper [is daerover ernstelijck bestraft, tot boetvardicheijt vermaent en van den taffel des Heeren afgehouden]." <sup>41</sup> What more subversive way of registering his feelings towards the established church than for Rembrandt to borrow an image redolent with Catholic belief and picture the Virgin with her heel on the snake and in a medium capable of wide distribution?

Knipping describes another interpretation for this iconography which, I suggest, could corroborate such a reading of Rembrandt's interpretation of this theme. This was Counter-Reformation iconography which identified explicitly the friction between the Catholic Church and its Reformist counterparts. According to Knipping, the serpent trampled on by the victorious Virgin was an image of heresy condemned. It represented the primal struggle between the Devil (as a representation of the break-away Reformed churches) and the Catholic Church as represented by the Virgin Mary. <sup>42</sup> The Virgin with her foot on the snake represented more than just the fulfilment of the Virgin as the New Eve, it was visible shorthand for the relationship

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<sup>40</sup> *Rembrandt Documents*, 318.

<sup>41</sup> *Rembrandt Documents*, 320.

<sup>42</sup> Knipping, *Heaven on Earth*, 245.



between the Reformed church and the Catholic Church and would have been recognised as such by a Catholic community.

## Interpreting the iconography

All commentators identify this etching as a Madonna of Humility. The Virgin sits on the floor, the humbleness of the posture made more explicit by the throne-like chair which stands empty to the left. This empty chair could be linked to a similar motif in *The Death of the Virgin*. In the *Death of the Virgin* it represents part of a Jewish ritual which takes place after death but it could also allude to the future. In *Virgin with Cat and Snake* it expresses a future promise, the Virgin's place as Queen of Heaven. Notwithstanding the acknowledged debt to Mantegna, there are obvious differences. In both prints the Virgin sits low, her legs folded in front of her with her child held tightly, his forehead nestled against her cheek. The position of the child, the way he is being held and the disposition of his legs are remarkably similar in both. Mantegna's Virgin sits upright, her head inclined over that of her child. But there is a sculptural character to Mantegna's work which is missing from that of Rembrandt. Her expression is at the same time tender and thoughtful. The child in her arms is awake, staring upwards but seemingly without focus. The crisp folds of her gown fall around her in meticulously etched planes of light and dark. Despite the tender scene of maternal affection, it remains a 'holy picture', unsupported by any background detail which might anchor it in a reality.

Rembrandt's Virgin and child, however, are the central focus of a more extensive iconography. He has deconstructed Mantegna's tight etching style, softening and simplifying the structured folds of his fabric with painterly hatching and cross-hatching so that the Virgin's gown falls in soft folds around her. Her position is more obviously slumped, her incline deeper, her head resting more heavily on that of her child and her knees, placed lower, fall apart.

At this point Rembrandt leaves the Italian model behind. He does this by placing the Virgin within a complex setting which is at the same time both domestic and stage-like. She is sitting in the angle of a low step on a platform approached by at least one other step. She sits in front of and slightly to the left of a curtained window through which can be seen the figure of her husband, Joseph. On the window-sill is a dish which suggests the child has been or is about to be fed. To the far left, an empty

chair and cushion sit beneath a draped canopy; to the right a fire burns in a deep chimney. Sitting on the step beside the Virgin is the now familiar motif of the basket from which a napkin falls. This could be a scene of quiet domesticity were it not for the radiance around the Virgin's head and two discordant inclusions: to the lower left a cat pulls at the hem of the Virgin's gown, while from under the hem of the gown, in the middle of the picture, a black snake appears, its forked tongue clearly visible. Rembrandt has added his name and the date 1654 directly below the snake. The placement suggests that Rembrandt might even be drawing attention to this motif.

In appropriating the imagery of the Virgin with the snake beneath her foot, Rembrandt is making a strong statement. Visualizations of Mary as the New Eve are typically shown as a single motif of the Virgin standing with the snake beneath her foot or occasionally, as noted, the Christ child helps her with this task. In this case Rembrandt has already subverted the motif by placing the Virgin, with the child in her arms and seated low on the ground. She has her foot on the snake but not on the head itself but a little lower down its body. The snake is still active and potentially threatening. This could be interpreted perhaps as a stronger intimation of Rembrandt's feelings towards the Reformed church.

In this particular scene Rembrandt combines a typology of the Virgin as the 'New Eve' with a visual commentary on her relationship with her husband Joseph. In a sense he has reversed the role of the male. In this case Joseph, as legitimizer of Mary's human pregnancy, protector of the Holy Family and hierarchically superior, has been placed painfully outside the picture. He is not just spatially distanced but is physically distanced from the room itself.

Christopher White describes the figure of Joseph as looking through the window with a look of "simple pride" on a scene "intimately expressive of a mother's love."<sup>43</sup> But Joseph is separated from the Virgin and her son, shown literally as the outsider in this intimate scene. White's observation takes no account of the symbolic meaning of the glass through which Joseph looks at his wife and child. Glass is a metaphor for Mary's virginity. In her discussion of this work Williams notes the metaphoric meaning: Mary's purity and her virginal pregnancy were like a glass through which light could pass its substance still intact.<sup>44</sup> The idea of glass as a metaphor for virginity arose in the middle ages when the female body was seen as containing

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<sup>43</sup> White, *Rembrandt as an Etcher*, 89.

<sup>44</sup> Williams, *Rembrandt's Women*, 201.

excess fluids from which it had to be purged. At the same, time virginity became stylized as a “precious liquid contained in a delicate bottle ... balm in a brittle glass.”<sup>45</sup> The bawd in Shakespeare’s *Pericles* speaks: “use her at thy pleasure: crack the glass of her virginity and make the rest malleable.”<sup>46</sup> Slive notes also that the frame surrounding Jan van Eyck’s *Madonna in a Church* (c.1437-8,) was inscribed with the words of a popular nativity hymn which ended with the lines “as the sunbeam through the glass passes not stains, so the Virgin, as she was, a Virgin remains.”<sup>47</sup> An early painting by Van Eyck, the *Ince Hall Madonna* (1433) includes a glass carafe “through which the sunbeams pass” as a symbol for her virginity.<sup>48</sup> The carafe as representative of Mary’s virginity was a relatively common motif in art. Bartel Behan’s *Mary in a Window Niche* (c.1529) (fig. 279), for instance, could be a prosperous Italian wife nursing her baby if it were not for the carafe of water and the vase of lilies placed in close proximity.<sup>49</sup>

But here it seems more than that. Rembrandt appears to be emphasizing the conjunction of sin with sexual intercourse. In a particularly graphic way he shows the sin of Eve represented by the snake and the Virgin mother’s conquest of sin through her virginal conception, but he also includes the figure of Joseph as representative of the human aspect of reproduction, alienated from the act itself. Here Rembrandt does not follow traditional iconography; he explores, instead, the human elements of the story, while still acknowledging Mary’s privileged identity as the ‘New Eve’.

Those human elements are made more obvious in the way Rembrandt uses the curtain as a motif. Perlove and Silver note that the curtain was a biblical analogy for Christ’s lifting the veil from the Old Testament, but they do not apply it to either Joseph or the Virgin herself.<sup>50</sup> In depictions of the Annunciation, Visitation and Nativity, the curtain became the context for shifting the emphasis to the motherhood of Mary.<sup>51</sup> Applied in this way, the curtain motif, as is seen also in Hugo van der

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<sup>45</sup> Frank Graziano, *The Lust of Seeing* (London: Bucknell University Press, 1997): 214.

<sup>46</sup> Shakespeare, quoted in Graziano, 214.

<sup>47</sup> Seymour Slive, *Rembrandt and his Critics*, 149. Image source: Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.

<sup>48</sup> James Snyder, *Northern Renaissance Art* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2005): 97. Image source: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

<sup>49</sup> See Heal, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary*, 98.

<sup>50</sup> Here Perlove and Silver, note Tümpel’s recognition of a verse from Paul’s second epistle to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 3: 14-16), “But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is take away in Christ” (Perlove and Silver *Rembrandt’s Faith*, 181).

<sup>51</sup> Eberlein, “The Curtain in Raphael’s Sistine Madonna”, 68.

Goes, *Nativity* (fig.169), is sometimes used, as Johann Eberlein has claimed, to push Joseph to one side, even outside the picture plane because “Joseph does not participate in the event of the Word becoming flesh.”<sup>52</sup>

Rembrandt presents a double motif for separation; he has used the window not only to signify Mary’s virginity but also to emphasise Joseph’s exclusion. He strengthens this separation with his use of the curtain, looped back from the window, to ‘reveal’ Joseph’s secondary role in the Nativity narrative. But the curtain can also be read as a metaphor for Mary’s virginity where it has a wider and more physical application. The curtain is, in this sense, synonymous with the word veil. The Greek word for veil is hymen. The hymen/veil is commonly interpreted in art as a drawn-back curtain and often represented in painted works, as a red curtain, with all its connotations of blood, menstruation, pregnancy and sacrifice and specifically connected to scenes of the life of the Virgin. Rembrandt uses it more recognizably in his *Holy Family* (Kassel, 1646) (fig.280) where he paints a heavy red curtain pulled back to reveal a scene of holy domesticity. Caravaggio presents an obvious example in the heavily draped red curtain which dominates the scene in his *Death of the Virgin* (1602) (fig.281). Caravaggio is re-using an iconographical detail which had its roots in the stylized iconography of early Christian art. Here, its appearance, either within the iconography itself as a decorative detail or dominating the scene as a swag summons for the viewer, in a readily recognisable form, the theological mystery of Mary’s physical humanity yet virginal conception (fig.282). The drawn-back curtain in this etching thus illustrates Joseph’s secondary role and, at the same time, represents the un-ruptured hymen, the physical reality of Mary’s virginity.

Rembrandt shows that he was aware of the sexual implications of using the veil as a revelation of female physicality. He shows it graphically in his small etching of *Joseph and Potiphar’s Wife* (1634) (fig.283), where he uses the motif as a metaphor for a would-be violation. The curtain is flung back as Potiphar attempts to drag Joseph into her bed. He shows it again in the *Ledikant* (1646) (fig.284), where the curtains are drawn back from the bed to show an act of intercourse taking place and, again, in his *Monk in the Cornfield* (1646) (fig.285), where the sheaves of corn are pushed back as a curtain to expose that same act taking place.

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<sup>52</sup> Eberlein, 68.

Rembrandt makes the motif of the curtain drawn across the glass, the veil of Mary's virginity and an indication of her virginal conception, a counterpoint to the snake, so obviously a manifestation of evil and an indication of Eve's role in the fall of man. The motifs fall in opposition to each other, through the radiance of Mary's halo, on the upper and lower edges of a central axis (fig.286). The introduction of evil into the world through the weakness of the woman Eve is the failure that Mary's virginal sacrifice redeems.

Mary's virginity appears to diminish Joseph's sacrifice. Joseph's expression is not one of simple pride but one of exclusion. He is not identified by any of the motifs that validate his place within the Holy Family as in earlier works such as the painted *Holy Family* (1635) (fig.150), *Holy Family with St. Anne*, (1640) (fig.165), *Holy Family with Angels* (1645) (fig.166) and *Holy Family with Curtain* (1646), which all identify him as a carpenter. He is an outsider. He looks, apparently longingly, in on a scene in which he takes no part. He is visually separated not only by the glass of Mary's virginity and the curtain-hymen but by the double halo which emphasizes her role in the history of salvation. Her halo becomes his exclusion, cunningly contrived. Williams suggests that changes to the plate may have indicated that Joseph had originally been placed within the room near to the chimney.<sup>53</sup> However there appears to be no evidence to support this hypothesis.

Mary's halo is cleverly situated within the oval glass of the window behind, which acts as a second halo. Rotermund sees her halo as augmented by a natural source of light. He reads the inner circle at the top of the Virgin's head as the setting sun with its rays coinciding in such a way as to make it difficult to decide whether "her head is surrounded by a halo or the rays of the evening sun." Later Rotermund appears to answer his own question; the sunbeams do not fall "by chance" but make visible for the sake of the viewer, (in this case quite literally) the bearer of Christ's word.<sup>54</sup> Hidde Hoekstra sees the brilliance as coming from the rays of the rising sun entering through the window as the symbol of Christ, "the Sun of righteousness" spoken of in Malachi 4: 1.<sup>55</sup> The particular brightness from this sun/halo lights only the back of the Virgin's head and the side of Joseph's body. Again, this is a motif Rembrandt has used before. The motif of exclusion can be seen as vividly in his pen and wash sketch,

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<sup>53</sup> Williams, *Rembrandt's Women*, 201.

<sup>54</sup> Rotermund, "The Motif of Radiance in Rembrandt's Biblical Drawings", 105.

<sup>55</sup> Hoekstra, *Rembrandt and the Bible*, 285.

*Holy Family* (1642) (fig.287). In this scene an unidentified outsider is shown knocking on the window-pane, apparently trying to gain the attention of the Holy Family which this time includes Anne, the Virgin's mother. There is the same oval pane of glass in the centre of the window and the same explosion of light from outside, again repeating the motif from Rembrandt's own studio. Despite the fact that the light in this work is illuminating the scene within, it does not have the same didactic qualities that the halo has in the *Virgin with Cat and Snake*.

Rotermund's theory of radiance in Rembrandt's work both fits and is inconsistent with this eruption of light from the Virgin's head. Although he notes the singularity of this particular etching which incorporates the architectural element of the window as a subsidiary halo, he does not explore the meaning. The manner in which the halo is executed – a ring of rays with one drawn out in length, fits Rotermund's pattern for Rembrandt's use of this motif as a means of expressing something fundamentally unpredictable. In this case, the extended ray does not indicate the personal encounter of another human being with Christ himself. The extended beam appears to end at the open basket, as do the rays emanating from the head of the child. Rembrandt has given the child an emanation of light separate from that of the Virgin herself which ends at the rumpled cloths in the basket, a prefiguring perhaps of the shroud.

The window and the halo as light sources which come from behind the Virgin and child have the effect of plunging both into deep shadow. The face and upper body of the Virgin and the child in her arms are heavily cross-hatched, so much so that the features are difficult to distinguish. The child appears to be asleep, one leg crossed over the other as he lies in the Virgin's arms, his cheek held tightly against her own. There is a protective quality in the gesture. Unlike Mantegna's Virgin, who is bathed in light and appears both tranquil and serene, Rembrandt's Virgin turns in on the child, her hands held more tautly than those of Mantegna's Madonna, as if she is sheltering him.

This protective stance might be read in relation to the visible threat of the serpent beneath the feet of the Virgin, but it is also suggested by the other motif that Rembrandt inserts into the work, the cat seen to the left pulling at the hem of Mary's gown. Although the snake has a defining role in biblical history, the cat appears to feature in only one episode. In the letter of Jeremiah appended to the Old Testament book of the prophet Baruch, a cat is mentioned as the animal that prowls over useless

gods enshrined within temples: “Bats, swallows, birds of every kind flutter over their bodies and heads and cats prowl there” (Baruch 6: 21).<sup>56</sup>

There is little likelihood that Rembrandt would have known of this obscure passage, but the association of cats with dark and evil forces has been woven into mythology for centuries. The sacrifice of humans in fire festivals throughout Europe as part of purificatory rites and spring festivals was recorded by Julius Caesar.<sup>57</sup> In less dramatic terms, during the Middle Ages, human sacrifices were replaced with those of cats and sometimes snakes, which were thrown on fires at Lenten and Easter festivals. The burning of cats became associated with the preservation from evil and witchcraft for “the cat that represented the devil could never suffer enough.” Cats were sometimes seen as the embodiment of witches themselves and were hunted and killed.<sup>58</sup> It can be assumed here that the cat is a representation of evil. White recognises the cat in this work as advancing towards the fire.<sup>59</sup> Perlove and Silver interpret it as about to pounce on the snake.<sup>60</sup> It seems more obviously to be clawing at the Virgin’s gown, but an association with the cat and the fire burning in the hearth is also made by Williams, who notes that the cat is seen as a symbol of evil, while popular tradition has it that “Satan dwelt in the chimney warm with hell fire”.<sup>61</sup>

Rembrandt has used the motif of the cat in other visualizations of the Holy Family. In his *The Holy Family with St. Anne* (1640) (fig.288), the cat is again placed in conjunction with the fire; here, the cat sits on a high bench beside the fire, its back arched as if hissing at something unseen by the viewer. It could perhaps be the particularly snake-like appearance of two branches lying across a log on the floor which are spot-lighted by the light from the window that draws its attention (fig.289). The cat crouched before the fire in his *Holy Family with Curtain* (1645) (fig.280) repeats this motif. The cat and the open fire, placed within the same scene, suggest two different readings: the cat is at the same time a sign of domestic comfort, a family pet, and a predator of the forces of evil which the Christ Child in the Virgin’s arms is set to overcome.

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<sup>56</sup> The Book of Baruch is found only in the Apocrypha, one of the Deutero-canonical texts not found in Protestant Bibles.

<sup>57</sup> J. G. Frazier, *The Golden Bough* (London: Papermac, 1990): 653.

<sup>58</sup> Frazier, *The Golden Bough*, 656.

<sup>59</sup> White, *Rembrandt as an Etcher*, 89.

<sup>60</sup> Perlove and Silver, *Rembrandt’s Faith*, 182.

<sup>61</sup> Williams, *Rembrandt’s Women*, 201.

In the etching *Virgin and Child with Cat and Snake*, the cat crouches beside an empty chair which sits on a raised platform behind the seated figure of the Virgin. In placing the chair elevated beneath a curtain canopy, Rembrandt suggests a throne. The heavily-draped curtains, which hang in two loops forming an arched opening above the chair, find their symbolism in the temple veil which was torn apart at the death of Christ on Calvary: “the veil of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom” (Luke 27: 51). Rembrandt has cleverly distinguished the two sets of curtains and the different roles they play within the iconography of this work. The curtain draped across the top of the window is lightly etched with long curved lines and textured to show the fine weight of a veil; the curtains that arch above the chair have the formal loop of theatre curtains.

Even the style of etching is different; tight lines and cross-hatching lend volume and weight. Such curtains divided down the middle and drawn apart, as the temple veil was torn apart at the moment of Christ’s death, reveal the messianic promise implicated in the small child lying in the Virgin’s arms. His life and his death are to be the fulfilment of the promise; his death tears apart the world of the Old Testament and reveals the new creation. Rembrandt anticipates this redeeming act which has yet to be fulfilled, in the presence of the empty chair. But the throne of Christ’s glory could as easily be that of his mother. The Virgin enthroned, the *Mater Gloriosa*, was seen by exegetes to parallel the role of Mary as *Mater Dolorosa*. Mary’s queenship, attained by her voluntary acceptance of the Divine summons, “expresses her signal triumph, through her virginity and her Assumption, over human weakness and evil.”<sup>62</sup> Rembrandt reinforces the understanding of a glory yet to come by flooding the chair with light. This light has a physical quality as well. Close study of an original etching show that the edges of the curtain are fluttering inwards in response to a heavenly breeze.<sup>63</sup>

Rembrandt plays with the light. An obvious exterior source comes from high behind the looped curtains to the left and radiates diagonally, its direction intimated by strong cross-hatched lines, onto the chair, across the knee of the Virgin and on to the foreground of the etching where it reveals the snake. It lights also the fire and the high chimney space which occupies the right side of the etching. There seems little intimation that any light comes from the fire itself but the few curved lines above the

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<sup>62</sup> Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 116.

<sup>63</sup> Etching viewed at the print room of the British Museum 8 September 2008.



logs suggest that the fire has been lit. The external light which comes through the window, from the sun, all but silhouettes the Virgin and child. By placing them in partial shadow, Rembrandt dramatically heightens the protective position of the Virgin as she leans over the child, seeming to enclose him in her shadow. By dark-shadowing this central group, it is as if the story itself becomes more important than the actors. Rembrandt demands that the viewer takes time to read the motifs for understanding cannot be found in a simple recognition of another Virgin of Humility.

Hidden within the exterior sun-light is a separate source of light which emanates from within the room and it comes directly from the Virgin herself. Her halo does not illuminate the room but shines outwards on to the figure of Joseph, seen outside the window. The halo-light shines on the left of his face, on his temple and on his shoulder in a way not possible if the single source of light had been from the rising or setting sun behind; Joseph's light is a reflection of the Virgin's own radiance.

Rembrandt has carefully indicated that Joseph is important, but his importance comes from his relationship to Mary and her son. By illuminating these parts of Joseph's face and upper body, Rembrandt has again drawn attention to those same areas he highlighted in his painting of the *Holy Family* (c.1633-35) (fig.150), the head and the yoke-bearing shoulder. But in silhouetting and shadowing the Virgin, Rembrandt re-emphasises her physical and sexual separation from her husband. He appears to ground Mary in the very human role of Mother and protector – the snake, as a presence of evil, clearly threatening, at her feet. She has yet to triumph although that triumph is assured.

The assurance of Mary's triumph came implicit in the divine summons when Mary accepted God's invitation to become the human mother of his son. The possibility was activated by the power of the Holy Spirit at the Annunciation when the angel tells Mary through whose power the act of conception will take place: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you..." (Luke 1: 35). The power of the Holy Spirit as it enters into human experience is most commonly visually indicated in the form of a dove. Buried in the bisecting cross-hatching to the upper right of the etching is the outline of a dove, its wings outspread. This presence appears to have remained unnoticed in the literature: it is obviously there with its head and beak tilted towards the Virgin (fig.290). The curved and hatched lines from below this presence move directionally towards the Virgin and her son. A comparison could be drawn here with a Dürer wood-cut of the *Annunciation* from his *Life of the Virgin Series* where he shows a

similar dove (fig. 291). Rembrandt is known to have owned this series. The presence of the dove remains part of a subtle web of motifs which indicate his knowledge of the iconography and the theology that supports the Virgin's presence in Catholic devotion.

Rembrandt has effectively visualized not only the spiritual messenger who sought Mary's acquiescence to the divine summons but also the divine power which remains as a constant protective presence over the mother and her son who was born into the world to overcome evil. Irenaeus captures this paradox when he says: "as the human race was sentenced to death by means of a virgin ... the guile of the serpent was overcome by the simplicity of the dove and we are set free from those chains by which we had been bound to death."<sup>64</sup> It is almost as if Rembrandt himself had known these words.

## Conclusion

Rembrandt appears to be re-using some earlier compositional motifs in this work. There are some similarities between this etching and a slightly earlier work, *Faust* (1652) (fig.292). The illuminated window in *Faust* and a shining disc which forms a mystical word pattern, a combination of Jewish and Christian lettering heavy with symbolic meaning, corresponds in part, to the supernatural light which forms the Virgin's halo in *Virgin with Cat and Snake*. There is also the suggestion of a figure peering through the window to the right in *Faust* and a double layer of filmy curtains drawn aside to reveal a mystical figure, a motif repeated in the figure of Joseph shown outside the window in the other etching. Perlove and Silver note also the similarities, between these two works. They interpret both as evoking the Pauline message found in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, "Now we are seeing a dim reflection in a mirror; but then we shall be seeing face to face. The knowledge that I have now is imperfect; but then I shall know as fully as I am known" (1 Corinthians 13:12-13). Here they identify Joseph as signifying the older face of Judaism, who can only "peer through a window from the outside vaguely seeing Mary and the Christ child." The obscured vision in both these prints, they argue, conforms to Christian ideas about the Old Testament which shadowed and concealed the Gospel of Christ from the Jews.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> St Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 5, 19, 1, quoted in Warner, 60.

<sup>65</sup> Perlove and Silver, *Rembrandt's Faith*, 66-67.

Such an interpretation appears to place Joseph outside his role in the history of salvation, still unredeemed despite his adopted kinship to the child Christ. Efforts to separate such Marian works from their formal Catholic sources suggest a rationalization of the iconography based on a Pauline and therefore Protestant interpretation which would appear difficult to maintain.

Visser 't Hooft also attempts to read this work through a Protestant lens. He speaks of Rembrandt making an indirect attack on the idealized Madonnas of the tradition in what he calls his “almost brutal way of stressing the Virgin’s lowliness.”<sup>66</sup> This view, he says, provides a way of reading this work from “within the spirit of the Reformed Church.” While it is true that Rembrandt deliberately organises this etching around the central figure of a humble virgin, this does not account for the complexity of the iconography. Rembrandt positions most of his Madonnas in this same lowly pose but so too does Dürer in many of his evocations of the Virgin Mary (fig.293). Rembrandt appears drawn to the possibilities offered by the visual tradition, borrowing and transforming them to suit his need.

Protestant theology of Rembrandt’s time stressed the humanity of the Virgin. Ideas of virginal humility were given further status in the preaching and writings of the early reformers. Martin Luther dwells on that particular virtue when he emphasizes the paradoxical notion that “humility is the highest of virtues”. In speaking of the Virgin Mary, he says, one should not dwell on her greatness and attribute all kinds of merits to her but, on the contrary, it is her lowliness and submission to the will of God which makes her the foremost example of God’s grace.<sup>67</sup> Calvin, too, when he speaks of Mary, stresses her humility; it is her faith and fidelity, not her merits that must be valued. In his comments on the *Magnificat*, Mary’s song on the occasion of her visit to her cousin Elizabeth, he says:

Humilitas here does not mean submission or modesty ...but it is tantamount to a vile and abject condition. The sense therefore is: That I was ignoble and contemptible did not hinder the Lord from deigning to turn his eye on me.<sup>68</sup>

In this sense Rembrandt’s *Virgin with the Cat and Snake*, his earlier *Holy Family* (1635) and his *Virgin and Child in the Clouds* (1641) all respond to a Protestant

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<sup>66</sup> Visser 't Hooft, *Rembrandt and the Gospel*, 46.

<sup>67</sup> Martin Luther, quoted in A.T.W. Steinhauser, trans. *Works of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Holman and Co. 1930): 157.

<sup>68</sup> Calvin, *La revue reformée*, Vol.7 (pub. 1562), quoted in Tavad, *The Thousand faces of the Virgin Mary*, 120.

emphasis on the lowliness of the Virgin, worthless in her own right, absolutely dependent on the grace of God. Rembrandt does not appear to linger on this aspect but takes it to a theological level. He fills this etching with theological possibilities: the triumph of good over evil, the fulfilment of Old Testament promises, the continuing paradox of a God made man, the Virgin Mother, Virgin of Humility and human mother. Rembrandt challenges Reformed belief by introducing iconography which places Mary as both the New Eve and Queen of Heaven. Seen thus as co-redeemer, it is a role which elevates her to a position untenable within Protestant theology. Rembrandt's adaptation of a familiar Counter-Reformation subject can be read more easily as a critical commentary on the Reformed Church itself.

Rembrandt has taken his inspiration from a print by Mantegna but he transforms it into something else. He does not place the Virgin at the centre of the work but to the left where he surrounds her in motifs that both acknowledge her queenly role and her power over the forces of evil. This image defies categorisation. Rembrandt reminds the viewer of the tradition. He records imagery and theological perspectives which are both proscribed but still believed and if not still believed, at least recognised. This image fits uneasily into a group of etchings which illustrate the childhood of Christ for it presents not a reality of Christ's childhood but a theological exploration of Mary's place within that Nativity narrative.

It remains an important point that, here again, Rembrandt's inclusion of Immaculate Conception iconography coincides with the political and religious aspirations of the Franciscan order. The Franciscans, as supporters of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, were rigorously committed to the official recognition of the belief. The proliferation of images of the subject in the early decades of the seventeenth century, says Suzanne Stratton, expressed not so much a popular fervour as a means of propaganda.<sup>69</sup> It may yet be found that here again Rembrandt was both aware of and adopted various motifs which responded to a Franciscan spirituality.

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<sup>69</sup> Stratton, *The Immaculate Conception in Spanish Art*, 3, 71.

## Thesis Conclusion

Rembrandt's identity as a Protestant painter can be read as a paradigm which both initiated and shaped the study of his biblical works. The philosopher, Patrick Bearsley, describes such a model. When a paradigm first comes to light, it does not begin precisely as a theory but emerges as a solution to a concrete puzzle which, in turn, offers a wider application in solving other puzzles. A paradigm, Bearsley suggests, serves as a template which vividly illustrates history, practice, theory and application and has the potential for further value extending ultimately to the whole field of research or at least a significant part of it.<sup>1</sup>

From the earliest stirrings of interest in Rembrandt's purported Protestant identity which emerged in nineteenth-century French political theory (Quinet, Coquerel and Houssaye), the paradigm of Rembrandt as the quintessential Protestant artist developed to the point where the art historian could take this common body of belief for granted. A coherent tradition of art historical research evolved which allowed writers from the early twentieth century (Clark, Valentiner, Rosenberg, et al) to make over-arching judgements which distinguished Rembrandt's 'Protestant' art from that of Catholic artists. According to this viewpoint, Rembrandt's creative process reflected his religious inclination since he referred directly to biblical text and this became his main source of inspiration. Catholic artists on the other hand, were said to make use of the pictorial tradition.<sup>2</sup>

The assertion of this early paradigm was to be found more explicitly in the work of writers in the 1980s such as Halewood, Smith, and Baldwin, where, in an effort to align theory with practice, they examined specific works in order to discern a singularly Protestant approach. Halewood in particular, in his *Six Subjects of Reformation Art: A Preface to Rembrandt* (1982), interpreted Rembrandt's etchings as representing images of a Protestant pictorial ideal, that is, the pre-eminence of grace over good works. According to Halewood, the difficulty experienced by other artists in attempting to show pictorially the transforming power of God's grace ceases with Rembrandt, who invents what he describes as a 'grace style'. This style is recognised

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick Bearsley, "Mary the Perfect Disciple: a paradigm for Mariology", *Theological Studies* 41.3 (1980): 465. The underlying science for the theory of paradigms is found in Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1971): 111-135.

<sup>2</sup> Tümpel, *Images and Metaphors*, 23.

in the way Rembrandt depicts the figures who witness either Christ preaching or some of his miraculous interventions.<sup>3</sup> The Protestant paradigm insists that human salvation is dependent on God's mercy alone, with no contribution from weak and sinful man. Halewood interprets Rembrandt's emphasis on poor, frail and dull-witted human figures, as illustrations of human weakness entirely dependent on Christ's redemptive role.<sup>4</sup>

Christian Tümpel (2006) notes that our view of Rembrandt as an illustrator of biblical histories is still largely determined by the critical views of writers from the early twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> According to his research, however, there is no great difference between the denominations and their interpretations of biblical or mythological events. Both Catholic and Protestant painters drew on the Bible, on medieval legends and on Flavius Josephus' *The Antiquities of the Jews* for their treatment of stories from the scriptures.<sup>6</sup> Earlier propositions, that Rembrandt favoured 'conversion' subjects that were seen to be preferred by the Mennonite sect, have been proven, with later research, to have been of little value.<sup>7</sup> Van Eck, for example, shows that such 'conversion' subjects as *The Calling of Matthew*, *the Incredulity of Thomas* and *the Baptism of the Eunuch* were found as easily in the clandestine Catholic Churches in the Netherlands.<sup>8</sup>

As more has become known about Rembrandt and his work, a new direction has developed. Rather than select works which provide specific examples to support a particular view, scholars have taken a broader approach to Rembrandt's *oeuvre*, acknowledging, as some earlier authors have done, that there are certain works which do not fit a 'Protestant' understanding. These are said to be Catholic in subject matter and perhaps made to appeal to a Catholic audience. Whereas these works have previously been treated rather in the nature of eccentricities, recent research has

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<sup>3</sup> Halewood chooses as his six subjects for review Rembrandt's varying approaches to *The Calling of Matthew*, *The Raising of Lazarus*, *The Prodigal Son*, *The Preaching of Jesus and John*, *Blessings and Healings* and *the Conversion of St. Paul*.

<sup>4</sup> In his final etching of the *Raising of Lazarus* (1642) for instance, Halewood recognises the response of the viewers to this miracle not as those of witnessing a miraculous event but rather as "dull-witted" incomprehension. The scene, he says "is not so much a wonder-working as a blessing, a gift of grace shared by all of the human characters. This response he says derives from a clear understanding of the main positions of Reformation Protestantism and a sympathy for Reformation spirituality. See William H. Halewood, *Six Subjects of Reformation Art: A Preface to Rembrandt* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982): ix, 47-48.

<sup>5</sup> Tümpel, *Images and Metaphors*, 23.

<sup>6</sup> Tümpel, 24.

<sup>7</sup> This observation was initially made by Hans-Martin Rotermund, *Rembrandt und die religiösen Laienbewegungen in den Niederlanden seiner Zeit*, 189, quoted in Visser 't Hooft, 24-25.

<sup>8</sup> Van Eck, *Clandestine Splendor*, 69, 74, 142.

attempted to absorb them more harmoniously within a Protestant frame for Rembrandt's work. They are instead treated as Catholic subjects that Rembrandt has manipulated to appeal to both a Catholic and a Protestant audience (Bernier, Auerbach, Perlove and Silver). This means that scholars have continued to bury the obvious Catholic inheritance of such works, their dependence on Catholic doctrine and their example of Rembrandt's close knowledge of Catholic dogma and devotion, beneath a perceived appeal to Protestant acceptability. While every other approach to Rembrandt's possible religious affiliation has been taken, to my knowledge, none has sought to examine these works in relationship to the Catholic tradition to which, I argue, they belong.

Not all writers take a polarized view by seeking to identify Rembrandt's vision with one particular understanding. Schwartz, for example, rightly identifies the deeply Christian ethic that underlay all society in seventeenth-century Europe.<sup>9</sup> Alliances, both religious and secular, were in a state of flux often changing to suit the particular circumstances of the time. A change in religious beliefs was often decided by others. Jo Spaans points out that people without any religious affiliation were defined as Reformed "although they could in fact be non-practicing or excommunicated Catholics, Mennonites or Jews." The term 'Reformed', he states, refers only to the fact that they were members of an officially Reformed society.<sup>10</sup>

Recent studies by cultural historians have done much to provide a contemporary setting for art in general and Rembrandt's art in particular. The degree of homogeneity within Dutch society both at a social and a religious level has been stressed.<sup>11</sup> Rembrandt's world was peopled with those who went about their daily business, little disturbed by the formal strictures imposed by those responsible for the governance of a Protestant community. The historian, Benjamin Kaplan, states that

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<sup>9</sup> Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book*, 315.

<sup>10</sup> Jo Spaans, "Religious Policies in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republic" in Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia and Henk van Nierop, eds. *Calvinism and Religious Toleration in the Dutch Golden Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 86.

<sup>11</sup> See in particular Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe*, (Cambridge, Mass., London, Harvard University Press, 2007): 243. Kaplan explains that neighbourhoods tended not to be segregated. In many Dutch cities there were many corporate bodies that promoted harmony among members. They were expected to help neighbours, give small loans, and intervene when domestic quarrels became violent. Religious groups interacted in the economic sphere. Servants were routinely employed across the religious spectrum. There was an unwritten code about how one should interact with people of other faiths. One of the key rules was that one should distinguish between rival confessions as entities – their dogmas, the particular rituals and their networks – and the people who belonged to them but one did not identify friends, relatives or neighbours by their particular confessions. What was apparent from the outside by no means was indicative of life lived within the private sphere. See Kaplan, 237-265.

anecdotal evidence shows a high degree of social integration, in spite of diverse religious persuasions, within the society of Rembrandt's time. Using Rembrandt's *The Syndics of the Clothmakers Guild* (1662) as an example, he states that the five men pictured belong to four different confessions: one was a Mennonite from the stricter old Frisian variety, one a Calvinist, one a Remonstrant and two had Catholic *schuilkerken* in their homes.<sup>12</sup>

Kaplan underlines the communal loyalties which tied people together despite apparent confessional difficulties. Different faiths shared both basic religious values and ideas; even the most confessional Christians shared a rich religious tradition from antiquity to the Middle Ages. The Dutch scholar Arnoldus Buchelius (1565-1641) for example, a militant Calvinist, in his private journals reviled both Catholics and Remonstrants. He viewed Catholics as stupid idolaters and the Remonstrants as undermining the Christian character of Dutch society. He actively lobbied the magistrates to take action against these groups. At the same time he had friendships with people from different faiths including Catholics and Remonstrants. All his life, for example, he had a close and spiritual relationship with Caspar Barleus (1584-1648), a leading Remonstrant. They respected each other's piety. Each thought the other a good Christian and therefore likely to be saved.<sup>13</sup> Kaplan interprets such wide toleration of religious discord as evidence of a new internal boundary, a line drawn around the privacy of the home which separated it from the public domain. Within the 'public domain' he says, by common consent, dissenters were given some limited freedom of worship; but in the private world, all types of accommodations were made.<sup>14</sup> In such an atmosphere a broad acceptability of religious subjects in art, even controversial ones, seems more likely than scholars have previously allowed.

Rembrandt lived in a world of religious polemics, but nowhere is there any evidence that he had taken sides: yet there has been a persistently felt need within the literature to identify a specific Protestant bias. As Richard Viladesau points out,

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<sup>12</sup> Kaplan, *Divided by Faith*, 237. Schama also notes this example of the businesslike attitude towards religious confessions which made Amsterdam unique across Europe for its tolerant attitude to various religious beliefs. See Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes*, 646-647.

Schapelhouman identifies the men seated around the table as: on the far left Jacob van Loon, the man half-seated as Volkert Jansz, the third member from left as Willem van Doeyenburg, the clerk, Frans Hendricksz Bell is standing behind and to the extreme right Jochem de Neeve the youngest member of the syndics. These men are identified from other sketches Rembrandt had made of them. She does not identify the syndic second from the right nor does she identify them by confessional belief. See Schapelhouman, *Rembrandt and the Art of Drawing*, 83-84.

<sup>13</sup> Kaplan, *Divided by Faith*, 257-263.

<sup>14</sup> Kaplan, 177.



however, art “unconsciously represents the concerns of its own society.”<sup>15</sup> Yet art does not necessarily express the artist’s religion, for some have no religion to express.<sup>16</sup> Nor does the artist’s own world fully account for his art, there are elements, suggests Viladesau, that come from “beyond the artist’s consciousness.”<sup>17</sup>

It is clear that Rembrandt had deep religious sensibilities which did not find their expression in any particular religious affiliation. The reality of his outer world was the business of art practised within the contours of daily life. It was a life restrained and re-formed by sickness, child-birth, death, debt, conflict and loss.<sup>18</sup> Among the most insidious and terrifying aspects of contemporary life in Amsterdam was the plague. Successive waves swept through Amsterdam in 1623-25, 1635-36, 1655-56 and again in 1663-64.<sup>19</sup> Portents and visions abounded. Hand in hand with the new prosperity came a fear of Godly retribution.<sup>20</sup> Such persistent fears fed popular piety.

Whether these catastrophic events contributed anything to Rembrandt’s choice of subject matter is not known, but they do offer a background in which his art, particularly his printed works, would find a ready market. A common religion which deprived its adherents of a female intercessor and a mother’s compassion could offer little in the way of visual comfort. Rembrandt’s Virgin was at the same time the mother of Christ and a very human mother. Rather than an object of devotion, she visually shared the human condition. In her humanity Mary became the figure with whom the faithful could identify and through whom they could appeal to her son. It is within this identification of Mary as ‘mediatrix’ that I suggest that some of Rembrandt’s Marian works fall. Viewed as such, these representations come into direct conflict with official Reformed belief.

Rembrandt’s Marian art collected around and to some extent described some of the major events of his own life. One is led to the conclusion that he responded to the

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art and Rhetoric* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000): 155.

<sup>16</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action. Towards a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1980):86-89, quoted in Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts*, 155.

<sup>17</sup> Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts*, 155.

<sup>18</sup> See Matheson *The Imaginative World of the Reformation*, 110-118; Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches*; Van Deursen, *Plain Lives in a Golden Age*, for an overview of living conditions in Post Reformation and early Modern Times.

<sup>19</sup> In 1655-56 the plague claimed 16,727 lives in Amsterdam. In that same city 9,752 died in 1663 and the following year 1664, 24,148 died. See Hedquist “Dutch Genre Painting as Religious Art, Gabriel Metsu’s Roman Catholic Imagery”, 168.

<sup>20</sup> For an overview of the moral dilemmas which faced the fledgling Dutch Republic see Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches* especially Chapter Three “Feasting, Fasting and Timely Atonement”, 129-220.

Virgin Mary as a presence in sacred literature and the visual tradition with an intimacy born of maternal conditioning and artistic familiarity. The Virgin was, for him, an active figure in his life, acknowledged, appealed to and explained through his art.

The easy familiarity with which Rembrandt included the Virgin has received little attention. Scholars have taken a largely piece-meal approach, including such works where necessary to explain the style and nature of Rembrandt's complete *oeuvre*. Gilboa describes the Virgin as the woman most often depicted by Rembrandt. She claims that the importance of this grouping of Rembrandt's work lies as much in the volume as in his choice of a particular Marian subject.<sup>21</sup> Yet Gilboa does not pursue the implications of her own conclusions; her own study is restricted to a chronological survey which gives little detail other than a brief iconographic description of important works.

Many of Rembrandt's inclusions of the Virgin in his art could fall into the category of history paintings, records of biblical events which would place the Virgin within Luther and Calvin's perspective of the good woman, meritless of her own accord but graced by God to become the mother of his son.<sup>22</sup> While providing an answer which allows a Protestant interpretation of his work, this would be a superficial assessment. A closer examination of particular works shows that far from working at this limited level, Rembrandt has included motifs which respond to a domestic piety associated with, but one suspects not confined to, Catholic worship and devotion. As historians such as Michael Montias, van Eck and Kaplan have noted, within the shifting religious allegiances of Rembrandt's time, old beliefs were subsumed but often not replaced.

Formal allegiances, apparent from the outside, as Kaplan states, by no means indicated the manner in which life was lived within the private sphere.<sup>23</sup> Art appears to have worked in much the same way. There was a distinctive difference between the

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<sup>21</sup> Gilboa, *Images of the Feminine*, 49.

<sup>22</sup> As Kreitzer points out, Luther's treatment of the Virgin Mary in his sermons began to be evaluated from very soon after it appeared in print. Positive and negative evaluations have see-sawed across the religious spectrum. A new wave of ecumenical interest has seen Luther's Mariology analysed in a more favourable light. At best, Kreitzer says, some Protestant authors have pointed out that Luther and his followers were simply not interested in Mary as a theological issue. See Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary*, 6-11. Tavard notes that at the same time as Luther was writing his reformatory pamphlets he preserved a warm piety for the Virgin Mary. He was not however interested in spelling out the details of his particular beliefs about the Virgin. His Mariology was strictly Christological and soteriological. See Tavard, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary*, 112.

<sup>23</sup> Kaplan, *Divided by Faith*, 265.

formal church art of the Protestant churches with its focus on biblical text and Reformed luminaries and Catholic Church art with its triumphalist espousal of Counter Reformation images. Beneath the proselytizing external ethic of both, as Michael Montias has shown, pictures of the Virgin comforted Protestant and Catholic alike.<sup>24</sup>

Efforts to define Rembrandt's Protestantism are largely unsuccessful. A reliance on historical documentation shows only what would have been true for most citizens; that he fulfilled the legal obligations to marry, to baptize his children, to bury his loved ones and to finally be buried himself within a Reformed church. As historians have shown, these churches were public spaces, open to all for these services, and demanded no religious obligation other than that basic Christian necessity of Baptism. A reliance on particular subjects which imply a Protestant leaning towards the preaching of the word and in particular Rembrandt's own self-identification as the Apostle Paul remain circumstantial and subjective. An emphasis on 'lowliness' and poverty in his beggar works, seen as a profession of Protestant values (Baldwin), can be shown to have been largely drawn from the work of the Catholic artist Jacques Callot. These subjects would have been as acceptable to a Catholic viewer as they were to their Protestant counterpart.

Rembrandt's 'Catholic' subjects, those depicting the Virgin Mary, however, embrace a network of religious symbolism which is often overt but sometimes covert. His *Annunciation* (c.1635) (fig.126) does not concentrate on Mary's humble acquiescence to the angel's invitation, a view favoured by the Reformists, but on the confrontational salutation of the angel itself and the fear and surprise that invitation evoked. The *Holy Family* (c.1633-35) (fig.150) is not simply a Holy Family used as an example of how a good Reformatist family should live in this world, but focuses on an identification of the physical motherhood of the Virgin explicitly shown as a *Maria Lactans*, a long established Marian title with formal Catholic doctrinal associations. The *Death of the Virgin* (1639) (fig.182) presents an imminent assumption of the Virgin's body into heaven and the *Virgin and Child in the Clouds* (1641) (fig.218) takes for granted her physical presence there, positions Reformed belief would again deny her. The *Virgin with the Instruments of the Passion* (c.1652) (fig.241) and the *Virgin with Cat and Snake* (1654) (fig.271) again allude to beliefs which belong

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<sup>24</sup> John Michael Montias, "Works of Art in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam", 331-369.

solely within Catholic dogma – to Mary as co-redemptrix and Mary as the New Eve. The theological structure which supports all these realizations is the essentially Catholic doctrine of the Virgin Mary immaculately conceived. She, who was born sinless and exempt from the consequences of the sin of Eve, was assumed body and soul into heaven to take her place beside her son.

It is impossible to separate these instances of Rembrandt's art from their Catholic roots. None of these works can be read solely as genre scenes, for they invariably intimate a deeper knowledge of Marian doctrine which can only be understood through a more focussed analysis. Valerie Hedquist offers a tantalizing possibility that Rembrandt may have been informed in this regard by a closer association with the Franciscans who serviced the Catholic needs of Rembrandt's own community and provided him with the model for at least three of his painted works.<sup>25</sup> Franciscan archives may yet turn up evidence of such an association.

This thesis does not attempt to suggest that Rembrandt was himself a Catholic. It seeks only to show through a study of history, of Rembrandt's life and of an analysis of six representative works that a narrow identification of Rembrandt as a Protestant painter has for too long limited and determined the way certain works are read. These works can be shown to embrace a Catholic theology which, despite efforts on the part of various scholars, is inexplicable in terms of Protestant ideology. There is a misunderstanding of Catholic ritual and belief which allows a distorted analysis of subjects which emerge directly from a long established Catholic visual tradition. A reluctance to accept the Catholicity of this tradition and Rembrandt's obvious knowledge and appreciation of the dogmatic dilemmas of his time has led to a distinctly partial analysis of some of his biblical works which distorts an appreciation of his *oeuvre* as a whole. Rembrandt's *oeuvre* is infinitely rich and complex simply because it is not limited to one doctrinaire position. The breadth and impartiality of his inspiration is not generally acknowledged.

Rembrandt's output was not dictated by commissions. He was eclectic in his choice of religious subjects, but they were his choices. He was a deeply spiritual man who lived his life, as John Durham puts it, "in a landscape of faith."<sup>26</sup> That faith is never defined in terms of a religious ideology but finds its particular identity in art

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<sup>25</sup> Hedquist, "Rembrandt and the Franciscan Order of Amsterdam", 28-29.

<sup>26</sup> John Durham, Taken from the title page of his book, *The Biblical Rembrandt, Human Painter in a Landscape of Faith*, Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2004.

which represents as best it can, the biblical truths available to Rembrandt through both the biblical text and the artistic tradition – a broader approach than some would allow him. Much Rembrandt scholarship has been shaped by the expectation that Rembrandt and his works conform to a Protestant paradigm, a constraint which cannot accommodate the concepts I have argued are embedded in his Marian works. Perhaps it is time now to re-configure the paradigm.

A paradigm comes to be replaced usually when it meets some recalcitrant phenomena which it cannot explain. If, after repeated and sustained attempts to come to a solution including modification of the existing paradigm, the phenomena still resist satisfactory explanation, the science may enter a period of crisis which will only be resolved by the emergence of a new paradigm. The new paradigm may initially do little more than accommodate the recalcitrant phenomena, but it gives promise of a wider application and can give explanation of much else in the field ... it may eventually win members thus establishing itself as the paradigm for future research and superseding the old.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Bearsley, “Mary, the Perfect Disciple”, 468.

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