



Rembrandt's  
Bible Stories



Rembrandt did not follow artistic conventions,  
but simply looked in the mirror

# Rembrandt

## the Storyteller

Koos de Wilt

‘If you compare Rembrandt’s etchings to those by other artists,’ says Dr David de Witt, Head Curator of the Rembrandt House Museum, ‘what strikes you is the liveliness and earthiness of his observations of nature. Artists who came before Rembrandt, such as Albrecht Dürer and Lucas van Leyden, but certainly also the ones that came after him, tended to idealise their observations. Rembrandt looked at nature and the world around him with new eyes. That’s really refreshing.’

‘As soon as Rembrandt finished his training with Pieter Lastman, at the age of 18, he started experimenting with new possibilities. He wanted to go beyond the customary way of thinking in terms of imitation, emulation and then finding one’s own style, and started analysing facial expressions anew. Rembrandt was acquainted with genre painters like Adriaen Brouwer, who was also interested in the way emotions are expressed by the human face, but what he did above all was to practise facial expressions in front of a mirror to help him depict them more realistically in his paintings and prints. He analysed how specific emotions – anger, surprise, disgust – actually looked in reality. And, of course, these studies also show us Rembrandt’s own face.’

Throughout his academic career, De Witt has intensively studied the life and work of Rembrandt and his circle of pupils and followers. He still finds the rebellious Rembrandt and his unorthodox method of working incredibly fascinating. ‘Rembrandt didn’t go along with the principle of decorum, which stated that artists should generalise and portray things as more beautiful than they were in reality. He didn’t make life more beautiful, but he *did* make it look

## A personal view of Rembrandt

Michael Huijser joined the Rembrandt House Museum as its new director in the spring of 2014 and wants to shed new light on the historical Rembrandt. Each year the artist's former home attracts more than 200,000 visitors, 80 per cent of whom are from abroad. Huijser wants to rekindle the Dutch public's love for Rembrandt by focusing on the artist's own story, on who he was as a person, and on the relationship between the artist and the city where he lived for such a long time. The etchings can help show this dimension. 'The museum's collection of etchings by Rembrandt is truly unique and the whole world should know about them. We would like to focus on the stories they depict in different ways. These personal and emotional stories are remarkable, not only from a cultural-historical point of view, but also from a modern and personal perspective.

Rembrandt's art touches your heart and is continually engaging new generations – our's included – in a dialogue. We want our visitors to look at the prints not just from a cultural and historical perspective, but above all from a personal standpoint. Telling stories from a different point of view is something writers of children's books do as well, which is why this combination works so well.'

'You can't get any closer to Rembrandt than this,' explains Huijser. 'At the Rembrandt House Museum we show how Rembrandt created his works, how he made his paint, what etching techniques he used and how he trained his pupils. In that sense we approach the artist in a way that is very different from that of regular museums. The wonderful thing about this is that it allows you to gain a clear sense of the person behind the artist – sometimes in a very direct way. In one of Rembrandt's prints you can see a dog squatting down to relieve himself. This would be unthinkable for other artists, but it is something we are all familiar with.' Curator De Witt is also aware of the provocative elements in Rembrandt's work. 'Rembrandt was reprimanded by his contemporaries for depicting a dog doing its business. Obviously, this didn't fit the decorum of dignified art. It simply wasn't done. In his *Inleyding tot de Hooge Schoole der Schilderkonst* (Introduction to the Art of Painting), Rembrandt's pupil Samuel van Hoogstraten said it was a downright disgrace. I don't think the master would have cared much, though. Rembrandt told his own story.'



A religious etching that features a dog doing his business: is that not going too far?

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# The forbidden fruit

Jan Paul Schutten

Jindi could hear the sound of voices near the fruit trees. That must be the people, she thought. Adam and Eve they were called, and Jindi liked them. She made sure to be around whenever they were picking fruit, because they always gave her something delicious. Jindi took a last quick sip of water with her trunk and trotted towards the orchard. When she was nearly there, she stopped. Adam and Eve weren't talking to each other, but to the serpent. And Jindi didn't like that serpent much. She wasn't sure exactly why. She was friends with all the other animals in the Garden of Eden: the lion, the tiger, even the crocodile. It was just the serpent, with his strange wings... there was something odd about him. Jindi stayed where she was and listened.

'Go on,' the serpent said to Eve. 'Just pick it...'

'But we're not allowed!' said Eve. 'God himself has forbidden it. If we eat it, we'll die!'

Jindi knew right away what they were talking about. In the middle of the orchard was one tree that no one was allowed to eat from. It was God's tree. No man or animal dared to pluck its fruit.

'You're wrong, Eve,' said the serpent. 'I spoke to God recently. You're not going to die. Quite the opposite, in fact! It's the tree of wisdom. If you eat from it, you will become as smart as God himself. That's why he doesn't want you to eat from it.'

'Really?,' Eve asked.

'I swear. On both my wings,' said the serpent.

magnet. Normally, I would just have carried on sweeping. But not today. Was it the sunlight gleaming through the roof and casting a glare on this little gathering that made it look so miraculous, almost sacred? I don't remember exactly, but I couldn't stop myself from joining them. Not in the foreground, of course. I've never been one to draw attention to myself. Instead I went up behind some other people, so that I could look over their shoulders. There was an old man I recognised. His name is Simeon. Simeon visits the temple so often that you could say it's his second home. It never ceases to amaze me that he manages to climb those stairs at his age. They say he's very pious. Oh, I also heard through the grapevine that God had revealed something to him. That doesn't happen every day, so naturally it made me even more curious than I already was. Maybe these people had something to do with his Revelation.

Simeon asked the man and woman to say their names. Joseph and Mary, they answered. I could see that the man, Joseph, was holding the doves tightly, so that they couldn't escape before his first-born son was declared pure. 'What's your son's name?', old Simeon asked.

'Jesus of Nazareth,' the father answered.



His wife passed her son to Simeon and then all went quiet. Nothing happened really, except that the sun shone brighter and brighter on our spot in the middle of the temple. I noticed that everyone was starting to feel uncomfortable. A cramp shot up my right leg from standing there so long, which made me regret having left my broom propped up against the wall in the corner. I could have leaned on it for support.

Then Simeon started to talk. Actually, it sounded more like singing than talking. He seemed to be under some sort of spell – I think that’s the best way to put it. Then, as if in trance, he moved his head back and forth while mumbling something I couldn’t exactly understand. Except for one word: Messiah. He said ‘Messiah’ several times and lifted the child up in the air. That caused his parents to feel slightly uncomfortable. It even made me feel nervous. Apparently, we were all thinking the same thing: as long as he doesn’t drop the baby...

But Simeon lifted the child calmly and then sat him on his knee.

‘Thank you, Lord,’ he said in a cracked voice.

‘For what?’ I couldn’t help but think.

‘Now Lord, I can go in peace,’ he continued.

‘Where is this going?’ I thought.

‘Your Kingdom on earth will come, thank you Lord. Your Holy Light has shone upon the Saviour,’ he said, pointing at the rays of sunlight that were still illuminating the child.

‘The Saviour that You have announced to me.’

The parents now seemed totally confused. My heart went out to the poor couple. According to Simeon, this child, who went by the name of Jesus, would save Israel and Jerusalem. Then Joseph, the father, let go of the doves. Out of pure shock. The child gave a little whimper and Simeon passed him back to his mother, Mary. Someone placed an arm around her shoulder for support. But why?

We all stood there looking at each other, not really knowing what to say. Then everyone got up and left the temple. I watched them leave, tottered over to my broom and got back to work as if nothing had happened. The two doves were still flying about, so I chased them out of the temple with the broom, outside where they were free. Then I put away the broom, walked down the stairs and headed off to see my mother. As if nothing had happened at all.





# See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil

Harmen van Straaten

‘Can you see anything? This wall is blocking my view.’  
‘I can see something if I lean farther out of the window.’  
‘Well, what do you see?’  
‘Pontius Pilate and two other men, tied to each other with a rope.’

I was leaning out of the window to let my neighbour know what was happening below.

Pilate was speaking in a loud voice, so my neighbour could hear perfectly well what was being said. She just wanted an image to go with it.

Today was a national holiday. Since it was Passover, Pilate said he would follow tradition and free a prisoner as a goodwill gesture. Only this time there was a problem. There were two prisoners. My neighbour wanted me to describe them.

‘Who are they?’, she asked.

‘I see two men,’ I said for the second time.

‘Yes,’ she replied, ‘I heard you. But what have they done?’ she wanted to know.

‘One is a dangerous criminal,’ I explained.

‘The other one says he’s the King of Israel. That’s why he was arrested.’

I’d learnt that information earlier that day.

My neighbour has trouble walking and doesn’t get out much any more.

Which explains why she wasn’t up to date with the latest gossip.