Rembrandt's Enterprise

THE STUDIO AND THE MARKET

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CHAPTER

I

THE MASTER'S TOUCH

ONE OF THE MOST distinctive and identifying aspects of Rembrandt's paintings is the way he applies his paint. Rather than striving to craft a representation of the world seen, as does Vermeer in *The Art of Painting*, for example, Rembrandt in his use of paint appears to obscure it, drawing our attention to the paint itself rather than to the objects it represents. Look at the sleeve of the late *Lucretia* in Minneapolis (pl. 9). The cuff of the garment that discloses the hand summoning witnesses to her suicide is tawny, worked over in a complex pattern of yellow and white brushstrokes applied with a loaded brush. We find a similar handling of the paint in *The Oath of Claudius Civilis* (pl. 4, fig. 1.3). The central part is all that remains of a much larger painting that Rembrandt was asked to do for the great new Amsterdam Town Hall. It represents the pledge given to the leader Claudius Civilis preceding the rebellion of the Batavians, the early inhabitants of Holland, against their Roman rulers. We can compare it with the way another Dutch painter painted a historical scene (fig. 1.4). In his depiction of the thirteenth century, Caesar van Everdingen accounts for every visible detail of the world, even down to the fringe on the foreground rug. We are made eyewitnesses to the people and accoutrements of thirteenth-century history as if they were objects depicted in a still-life. Time is effectively effaced and robbed of a sense of history. Rembrandt, on the other hand, obscures the surface of both people and objects. His painting is hard to make out at first—the figures and objects, which appear to emerge into light from the obscured, darker surroundings, are bound in an extraordinary way to the paint surface. The visual presence of the paint interferes with, or replaces, the implicit access to the surfaces of the world. Everything, from the firmness of

hand grasps to the diverse richness of a garment, is urged upon us as the display of different qualities of pigment that is not only colored, but worked and shaped. The oath taken by the Batavian revolutionaries is celebrated in the very material of the paint.

In early accounts of Rembrandt, the thickness of his pigment consistently draws comment: paint an inch thick; a portrait painted so that the canvas could be lifted by the sitter's painted nose; jewels and pearls which seem to have been done in relief. Houbraken makes a story out of it: he tells how in order to maximize the effect of a single pearl, Rembrandt painted out the figure of Cleopatra.[1] All of these comments speak to Rembrandt's handling of the paint, but also to his using it to attempt to represent objects by recreating them in paint. Thus a compelling reason for having seen *The Man with the Golden Helmet* (pl. 12) as a canonical Rembrandt is the impasto of the worked metal of the helmet. Though among recent critics at least one found the impasto of the helmet overly substantial and hence not attributable to the master's hand, the evidence is that, since Rembrandt's own day, a substantiating impasto has been seen as a characteristic of Rembrandt's production.[2]

These old observations have been confirmed by recent technical research, which suggests certain constancies in Rembrandt's extremely various and continuously experimental manner. If one could point to a single major discovery—one which signals a change in the understanding of Rembrandt's way of painting—it is that the laying on of glazes in the Venetian manner is not basic to his technique. A glaze is a pigment made transparent by a high admixture of resin. Titian and the other Venetians dragged one such thin, transparent layer or veil of dark paint over an underlying layer of lighter paint to create an optical play of color on a rough-woven canvas. Rembrandt, on the other hand, tended to build up a solid structure out of opaque pigments. Having blocked the figures onto his prepared ground. Rembrandt characteristically laid in thickly, in high impasto, the highest lit areas of the picture, sometimes working the paint with the palette knife or even with his fingers rather than with the brush. It looks as if on occasion Rembrandt even used a glaze in a contrary way to heighten the solidity effect: the shoulder of the man in red raising his musket to right of center in *The Nightwatch* appears to be a patch of red lake glaze put on top of some red ochre. It is not used to describe a particular fabric or costume, but to call attention to solidity and also visual richness for its own sake.[3] When asked about the materiality of Rembrandt's paint, one conservator I talked to referred to the white lead (with its

admixture of chalk) structure as the skeleton or armature of the picture, while another spoke of Rembrandt's works as having the solidity and the appearance of being wrought that we associate with metal. (Originally these effects would have been stronger. Conservators point out that as the result of restoration procedures which used to involve "ironing" the canvas in the course of relining, few Rembrandts today retain their original impasto.) The raised areas of paint are built up so that they can reflect natural light and cast shadows as would real, substantial objects (pl. 7). A paradoxical effect of this handling is to make the highest-lit areas of the painted world not the most ephemeral, with light erasing form as it so often does in Western painting, but precisely among the most substantial.

Rembrandt was a slow rather than a fast painter. Layers of paint testify to what we know about the length of time it took him to complete and deliver works. (It is also possible that he was one of those artists who was loath to let a work go. And many who have studied Rembrandt comment that he got not more but less certain as time went on.) Baldinucci, who comments on the reluctance of prospective clients who knew how long it would take to sit for Rembrandt, puts it well when he wonders how, with such quick brushstrokes, Rembrandt worked so slowly and painstakingly.[4] For all his accomplishment, Rembrandt was not notably decisive or economical as a painter. He contrasts in this with the actual speed and the effect of speed given off by the brush of Hals. Though the paint of Rembrandt and that of Hals is often compared, there is little similarity between their modes of painting besides the visibility of the brushwork. Indeed, with the exception of those who followed Rembrandt's example, it is hard to find other Dutch artists whose paint surface is comparable to his in this regard. One might cite the slowly worked and built-up surfaces of certain animal painters—I have in mind some cows by Cuyp or the coarse flank of Potter's famous *Bull*. But these are descriptively imitative of the surfaces of things as Rembrandt's worked paint is not.

One of the reasons that the thickness of Rembrandt's paint was commented on in his own time is that it fitted into an established way of describing pictures. Writers, invoking ancient precedent, commonly distinguished between two modes of painting—a smooth and a rough one, or a finished and a less finished, loose, or free one. This was related to the distinction between those paintings appropriately viewed close up and those appropriately viewed from farther away, which was instanced by Horace when he came up with his long-lived phrase "ut pictura poesis," though Horace did not

1.1. Rembrandt, *The Jewish Bride*. By courtesy of the Rijksmuseum-Stichting, Amsterdam.

1.2. Jan de Bray, *A Couple Represented as Ulysses and Penelope*, 1668. Collection of the J. B. Speed Art Museum, Louisville, Kentucky.

1.32. Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait*, 1658, detail (hand holding maulstick). © The Frick Collection, New York.

introduce the rough/smooth distinction.[5] Certain social and artistic values came to be attached to the difference between the two manners. In Vasari's account the rough or unfinished manner of Donatello or of Titian offered a display of imagination over and above mere manual skills and, as such, appealed to connoisseurs, who enjoyed knowing how to fill in what the artist's quick and brilliant brush suggested to their sophisticated eyes and imaginations.[6] The rough style, then, in the Italian account at least, was the virtuoso's art for the knowing courtier. Karel van Mander, the northern writer and artist often referred to as the Dutch Vasari, picked up the Italian distinction and repeated it (his terms are "*net*" and "*rouw*"), with a warning, for the benefit of the northern artists, that they would do well to start smooth.

In the Netherlands, it will come as no surprise, Rembrandt and Hals were among those called rough, and Dou and Van Dyck smooth. By 1650, Rembrandt and Van Dyck were spoken of as the paradigmatic artists in the two respective modes, and we have accounts of artists at that time who felt they had to make a choice between the two.[7]

Today the rough/smooth distinction with its attendant values is offered not only as a description of, but implicitly also as an explanation for, Rembrandt's paint. On this account, Rembrandt's handling of the paint was a suggestive device directed toward the sophisticated viewer. There is an anecdote told by Houbraken about Rembrandt's studio that fits the model of the refined viewing skills assumed by the rough manner: the painter advised visitors to his studio to stand back lest they be poisoned by the smell of paint. This is perhaps reiterated in the postscript to the letter to Constantijn Huygens in which Rembrandt instructs his patron to hang a gift painting in strong light and to view it at a distance.[8] Further, it is true that several of the early writers, among them Félibien and de Piles, recommend a distant view as appropriate to Rembrandt's brushwork in terms which fit this sense of the distinction rough/smooth. This was, after all, the established verbal manner in which to give a positive account of the rough mode at the time. But does it offer a just account of Rembrandt's practice?

In the north by 1650, the balance of taste for the two manners was the reverse of the account just given. Let us take first take up the issue of how the two styles were received: contemporary accounts offer evidence of what was involved for Jan de Baen, one of Rembrandt's pupils, in choosing the proper artistic path to follow in the Netherlands about 1650. It was the smooth style associated with

Van Dyck, rather than the rough one, that was perceived as appropriate to the court, and historically it was seen as the new fashion replacing the old style of Rembrandt (figs. 1.27, 3.24).[9] Instead of appealing to a knowing and imaginative courtier, the rough style was seen as passé and, in the case of Rembrandt at least, as being tainted with the marks of the studio. On this view, to call attention to one's paint was not the refined thing to do. This is one way of understanding the early accounts of Rembrandt's life, which report that he was too openly messing about with his paints. Baldinucci, for example, reports that he cleaned his brushes on his clothes, and a persistent theme in Houbraken's life is the relationship between Rembrandt's uncouth manners and his rough manner of painting. (Rembrandt's recorded public behavior, which we shall consider in chapters 3 and 4, does not contradict these reports.)

Why should the attitude toward rough and smooth in the north be so different at this time from that in the established tradition of writing about pictures? It might be a sign that the north was historically in the vanguard of European taste in embracing a new neoclassical finish—that it was so to speak "beyond the rough." This is how De Baen's choice has been understood by modern scholars. But I suspect that the turning away from Rembrandt's rough handling is also a reaction against the old cultural status or location of art in the north. Even in Rembrandt's time much art-making in the Netherlands was still bound to the craft world of guild and workshop rather than to a privileged and literate society beyond. The smooth style was seen as marking a break with this. There was a certain justness about the criticisms of Rembrandt's paint. In painting in the manner that he did, despite the growing popularity of the smooth manner, Rembrandt called attention to his craft by effectively presenting his performance as that of a maker in the studio. In effect, he transformed rough painting negatively viewed into a newly positive practice.[10]

We have considered various descriptions of Rembrandt's paint, but if we want to explain what Rembrandt was doing, we might put the question in terms of production: does his insistence on the thickness or materiality of his paint, to return to a feature noted by contemporary commentators, challenge craft in the name of suggestiveness? Or does it rather call attention to craft in a new sense by the production of a substantial, as distinguished from a suggestive, pictorial presence?

We might consider the nature of the paint surface in Netherlandish art in somewhat different terms. Rembrandt was not the first artist in the north to associate the visible display of the handling of the paint with what I have called craft. But he did this with a difference, and to clarify this point it will be useful to play him off against a particular craft tradition. Like Rembrandt's works, this tradition cannot be described in terms of the rough/smooth distinction as that came to be understood. It did not offer lack of finish as an enticement for the connoisseur, but instead made a certain kind of pictorial craftsmanship the basis of a claim about the nature or value of art. I am referring to the tradition of painters who were often involved with some form of still-life, and who considered their art to be in competition with Nature herself.

Jan Bruegel, the first great flower painter, strives to make his painted flowers equal to and even finer than those made by Nature (figs. 1.5, 1.6).[11] His paintings are a display of artistic virtuosity, and it is for that reason Bruegel intends us to see his brushstrokes at work as well as the panel which supports them. To appreciate the art in this art, one does not stand back but comes close. Although paintings of this kind are often described as reminders of mortality, there is evidence that they were produced as a display of human craft and to satisfy a desire for the possession of knowledge. They were included in those curious encyclopedic collections, the first museums, that were assembled by European princes to be a microcosm of the world and, in turn, recorded in yet further pictures. Such a collection might include sculpture, painting, jewels, coins, shells, a sea horse, and also flowers in paintings as a way to preserve them (fig. 1.7). But besides presenting themselves as a display of human artistry, Jan Bruegel's pictures supply (or flirt with supplying) value in more ways than one: the specimens are painted so as to fool our eyes into thinking they are the real thing; they are chosen for their rarity; the materials were chosen with an eye to their cost—copper as a support frequently, lapis lazuli as a pigment, gold for certain frames. It was because of these values, among others, that the paintings were priced more highly than the special specimens and objects represented in them.

A similar claim to value was made in Holland during Rembrandt's lifetime by a painter of still-lifes such as Kalf. In choosing to devote his attention to a rare piece of china, to silver and fine glassware rather than to flowers, Kalf seems to have been competing with other human craftsmen rather than with nature. His works make the claim that he could with his paint craft a finer silver plate or glass goblet than the silversmith or glass blower could make. We watch in slow motion the working of the paint by which he is able to

represent the smooth surface of a gleaming glass, or the fuzzy surface of a peach. Such a painter lays claim to being supreme among human craftsmen. And he paints his pictures for wealthy Dutch merchants who are buying expensive illusions of expensive possessions.

My reason for bringing up Jan Bruegel's handling of paint is to break through the simple reception theory engaged in the discussion of rough and smooth and to introduce, instead, questions of the production of painterly value, with which Rembrandt was also concerned. But it is Rembrandt's difference from Bruegel within this scheme of things that I hope to demonstrate, and to that end let us consider the one work in which Rembrandt might be said to have taken up the Bruegel mode (fig. 1.8). His etching of a shell is the only "pure" still-life—by which I mean a work without the added presence of any human figures—that we have from Rembrandt's hand in any medium. (And Rembrandt seems to have discouraged artists in his studio who had such talent.)[12] Rembrandt's shell reminds us of Jan Bruegel, who often painted shells lying beneath a vase of his flowers. In representing a shell, Rembrandt turned to an object that fascinated collectors at the time, because shells were thought to occupy a separate category on the borderline between art and nature. The shell was an example of natural artifice, of Nature acting like an artist. Put a bit differently, it is Nature reproducing something that looks as if it were crafted by man. (The point is rather like our delight when we bring a shell or piece of drift-wood home from the beach and display it on a shelf because it seems to mimic the work of a human artist.)[13] But unlike Bruegel's shells or flowers, there is no possibility of illusion on the part of Rembrandt's shell. The value of Rembrandt's etched shell is distinguished from, rather than associated with, other kinds of values.

By making the remarkable decision to etch the shell, transforming its pale colors, its curved and glossy surface, into lines (and dots) of black on white, Rembrandt intentionally calls attention to the difference between what the shell is made of and a picture of it, and between the look and the value of the object and the look and the value of an image.[14] Rembrandt was himself a collector and most probably owned this shell. But in etching it, and doing that not only once but reworking it in three successive states, he was not displaying a taste for natural knowledge, nor a taste for the possession of a rare and expensive shell, nor a taste for fine materials (all the recorded impressions of the shell are on an ordinary paper), but rather what one might call a taste for representation. The shell from his collection is transformed and multiplied by his handiwork in the

studio for circulation on the market as a number of collectible Rembrandts. And it is notable that Rembrandt signed and dated the etched shell starting with the first state.

The etched shell offers a particularly rich example of how Rembrandt established representational values by shunning the multiple values courted by Bruegel's paintings. As an etching of a shell it is of course a special case, a negative example, both in choice of subject and choice of medium. Let us now ask how we might describe the values claimed by Rembrandt's paintings. What is the nature of his production of painterly value?

Rembrandt chose to study with a group of Amsterdam painters of small, narrative pictures who called little attention to their paint.[15] They are not memorable for their surfaces. For them it was the story, not the paint with which it was executed, that mattered. The option of rough or smooth seems not to apply. But early in his career we find Rembrandt, in a painting done when he was about twenty years old, carving into the wet paint surface with the end of his paint brush or with his maulstick (the wooden stick on which the painter steadies his brush when he paints) (pl. 1). He already treats his medium as something to be worked in, as if material to be modeled, though in the early years this handling was often focused on the underlayers of paint. It is the paint's capacity to be so worked, not its beauty or value as material substance, that Rembrandt prizes from the start. Other painters at the time made on occasion a display of particularly valuable pigments: Velázquez used ultramarine or azurite for a sky, and Frans van Mieris, himself a goldsmith's son, gilded a copper plate to achieve a gemlike luster on the painted surface. It is remarkable that Rembrandt was, apparently, the only other Dutch painter at the time to have used gold. We should recall in this connection the unexpected use of expensive red lake glaze to build up the shoulder of the musketeer in *The Nightwatch*. Rembrandt's continual experimentation with the handling of pigments did not involve the display of their value as such. On the four occasions when he (or his workshop, if the works are not all by him) used gold as ground or, in the Los Angeles *Raising of Lazarus*, as part of the paint surface itself, it is less for the purpose of luster than in the interest of the three-dimensionality of the pictorial form.[16] His paintings display the gold *effect*, as in the chain of *Aristotle*, not the thing itself. (One should add that this—displaying *effect* rather than valuable materials—could not be said of the production of etchings, in which Rembrandt's interest in rare and diverse kinds of paper is justly renowned.)

There is another dimension, which is superficially like another sense, that is engaged by Rembrandt's paint surface. In the mature paintings, paint is worked to engage our sense of touch as it is mediated through our sense of sight. Rembrandt lays the paint on with his brush and often shapes it with his palette knife or fingers so thickly that it looks as if one could lay one's hand on it. Notice the raised ridges of pigment that define the chain (or is it meant as a ring?) which loops over the little finger of the *Aristotle* in New York (pl. 3). It is true that painters were praised at the time for their ability to recreate texture in paint. Jan Bruegel, whose flowers we just looked at, was nicknamed Velvet Bruegel for that very reason. He could, as the name suggested, depict velvet and other surfaces like the petals of a flower so that one could, so to speak, *see the texture* of their surfaces. Rembrandt did not display his craft as a painter by rendering those visible properties—the illusory surface effects of look and texture—that were captured with the brush of Bruegel or Kalf. In a painted passage such as Aristotle's chain, Rembrandt makes the materiality of the paint itself representational. Qualities that we know by touch—the weight and pressure, the substantiality of things—we are made instead to see.

Rembrandt does not expect us to actually touch a painting, as Constable is reported to have wished.[17] But by appealing to the physical activity of touch he is able to suggest that seeing is also an activity: vision, so the analogy proposed by his paint goes, is a kind of touch. In *La Dioptrique* (1637), Descartes illustrated vision (the way we see, as distinguished from the mechanism of the eye) with a reference to a blind man probing with a stick. The eye, he argued, is affected by light carried by the air just as the hand is affected by a stick. "Seeing with sticks" was the notion of seeing proposed by Descartes's text and by the illustrations which accompanied it (fig. 1.9). One does not assume that Rembrandt espoused any particular theory of vision. But his paint surface, as well as the subject of some works, shows that he shared an interest in blindness and in touch with those pursuing natural knowledge and in some measure for the same paradoxical reason—as a condition of attending to the nature of seeing. It is not the eye as an image-making mechanism, but the activity of seeing, that his paintings call attention to. His laying on of substantial paint can be described as making something that is visible in this sense.[18]

Rembrandt's building up of paint and of objects in paint helps explain the curiously flat or even absent space of his mature works. There is the awkwardly foreshortened or truncated bed in the Kassel

Jacob Blessing (fig. 1.10) or the characteristic peripheral fading-out and lack of spatial definition around the major single figures. The absence of the illusion of depth in Rembrandt's late paintings is not due to the fact that he painted before the introduction of perspective theory into the Netherlands (as Jan Emmens suggested in *Rembrandt en de regels van de kunst*), but rather because he considers both the objects in his paintings and the paint itself to be thick or solid substances. In his etchings and drawings, when he is not using paint, Rembrandt, by telling contrast, does depict space persuasively. (A number of artists, among them Hoogstraten and Nicolaes Maes, who were his students in the 1640s, pursued the interest of perspective in paint that Rembrandt eschewed.) There is a kinship here with that combination of substantiality of paint and notorious difficulty in depicting space that we find in an artist like Manet. To such a material sense of pigments and of the objects in view, space is registered negatively, as an absence of substance.

Before we go any further, we might do well to distinguish between three forms in which this availability to touch is manifest in Rembrandt's paintings: the facture or thickness of the paint, the implied solidity of objects represented within the paintings, and the painting itself as an object. It is the overlay or overlapping between these different but related claims that produces the distinctive appearance and the nature of his paintings: they can be accommodated neither to the Italian model of the window on the world nor to the Dutch model of the mirror or map of the world, for they are produced instead as new objects in the world.[19] There is, finally, one further manifestation of touch in Rembrandt's works which is related to, but distinct from, those just noted: the prominence and activity of the painted hands. We are turning our attention now from the deployment of paint to its thematization in Rembrandt's paintings.

The hands of *Bathsheba* in the Louvre (figs. 1.12, 1.13) and those of the woman possibly representing Sarah, in Edinburgh (figs. 1.14, 1.15), are exaggerated, almost grotesque in size. In the Edinburgh painting Rembrandt has gone out of his way not to observe that rule of sight that Gombrich illustrated with the bingo-ball effect: namely that we depend on certain constancies of knowledge to "correct" the huge appearance of objects, such as hands, thrust towards us.[20] But there is another factor. Our hands are large in relationship to our bodies, and painters normally reduce their size to make their appearance less awkward or overbearing. As Bathsheba's large left hand resting on the cloth beside her makes clear, Rem-

brandt refuses to make this adjustment. Why this emphasis on prominent hands? First, because in Rembrandt's paintings to touch with the hand gives access to understanding. Here is an early portrayal of an old woman reading a book (fig. 1.16). This is perhaps the artist's mother, and it might be intended as a picture of the prophetess Hanna. It is not the identity of the woman that is our interest, but the way Rembrandt depicts her reading. She does not look at the book in front of her as much as she absorbs it through her touch, almost as a blind woman today might move her hand across a page printed in the raised type of braille. The difference between this and a contemporary painting by Rembrandt's first pupil Dou is telling (fig. 1.17). Dou's woman looks, as we are invited to look with her, at both text and picture. Unlike Rembrandt's book, Dou's is there to be looked at. Rembrandt intentionally leaves the text, which is unillustrated, illegible. Hard as we look, we cannot make out a word. And what lies between us and the text is the finely worked hand. It is as if the hands, rather than the eyes, were the instruments with which the woman reads. Houbraken complained about Rembrandt's lack of care with hands, adding that in portraits he either hid them in shadows or put in the wrinkled hands of old women. There is a contradiction here, because the depiction of wrinkled skin was one form that Rembrandt's attention to hands took.[21]

Human understanding as well as textual understanding is prominently marked in Rembrandt by the laying on of hands. One understands why the biblical passage in which the old Jacob picks the grandson he wishes to bless by touching his hand to the head proved so fascinating to Rembrandt (fig. 1.11). Love between man and woman in *The Jewish Bride* is demonstrated through a complex overlaying of very large hands (pl. 7). It is as if the hands had grown to these unusual dimensions in order to be sufficient to their task. And hands are pivotal in the welcome offered to the returning prodigal son in the painting in Leningrad (figs. 1.18, 1.19). The father faces his son and the viewer, but it is his hands resting in greeting on the rough cloth of the son's garment which bind the forgiving father to the penitent child. In works such as these, touch answers to the desire for the demonstration of love between people. Ordinarily, sight is necessarily out of touch because to see one must be at a certain distance from what one views. Touch is more immediate than the distanced eye. The attendant figures who, in contrast to the father, are looking on at the right demonstrate this difference

(even if, as some experts believe, they were not executed by Rembrandt's hand).[22]

Rembrandt investigates blindness or its symptoms in order to heighten our sense of the activity of perception. The father's eyes appear to be drained of sight, as if they were literally dimmed in respect to the immediate contact offered by the laying on of hands. One could say the same thing about Rembrandt's fascination with the blessings bestowed by the blind Jacob or Isaac. Blindness is not invoked with reference to a higher spiritual insight, but to call attention to the activity of touch in our experience of the world. Rembrandt represents touch as the embodiment of sight: seeing done with hands instead of with Descartes's sticks. And it is relevant to recall that the analogy between sight and touch had its technical counterpart in Rembrandt's handling of the paint: his exploitation of the reflection of natural light off high relief to intensify highlights and cast shadows unites the visible and the substantial.

To propose a rule about a single aspect of Rembrandt's varied practice is of course to invite exceptions. But we might consider how often the prominent hands in Rembrandt's paintings are not deployed in expressive gestures, nor described—as Van Dyck's attenuated and useless aristocratic ones are, for example—as a sign of social class. How often are hands instead depicted as the instrument with which we touch or grasp. Sometimes this is achieved by indirection as in *The Nightwatch*, where Captain Banning Cocq's raised hand stains, with a commanding shadow, the lemon yellow jacket of his lieutenant (fig. 2.1).

We are so used to the familiar title of *Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer* that we tend to ignore the fact that Rembrandt makes the philosopher's relationship to that great writer he so admired a matter of touch (pl. 2, fig. 1.20). While one oversized hand rests on his hip, fingering his heavy gold chain, the other rests on, in order to feel and thus to know, the marble bust. (The bust, like the shell, was an item from Rembrandt's own collection he put to studio use.) The right hand takes on the creamy color of that bust it probes, while the other hand retains what is established, by contrast, as the ruddier appearance of flesh. We happen to have evidence that this particular gesture was noticed when the painting was new. The work had been ordered by an Italian collector who also wanted some other paintings similar in kind to hang along side of it in his collection. He sent a drawing made after Rembrandt's painting to Guercino to order a companion piece. The Italian artist responded

by suggesting that he supply a portrait of a cosmographer (a portrait of a man with his hand on a globe) to accompany what he took to be Rembrandt's portrait of a physiognomist (one who studies human nature through a study of human features). Guercino, in other words, was struck by the gesture of the hand on the bust and furthermore read it as having to do with a particular form of knowledge—physiognomy.

It has been suggested that Rembrandt's *Aristotle* is related to those familiar types of contemporary portraits which depict a man with part of his valued collection or perhaps a scholar or an artist with a bust of an admired intellectual or artistic model.[23] But we might consider the *Aristotle* as Rembrandt's version of a picture like Dou's *Doctor* (fig. 1.21), which, as it happens, was also painted in 1653. It is, in other words, a picture concerned with knowledge or with the means by which we apprehend the world. In taking the *Aristotle* to be a physiognomist, Guercino saw it in such terms. Whatever one might take the nature of such knowledge to be, on Rembrandt's account, a salient point is that apprehension of the world is actively sought through touch. Aristotle's eyes, shaded in a characteristic Rembrandt manner, are not fixed on anything in the external world. Lost in thought, perhaps, he is taken up with touch.[24] Dou's doctor is portrayed as a man who understands the human condition through sight alone. In this instance, he directs his eyes to the contents of a urine bottle—a substance whose appearance was taken then, as it is today, as offering a visual symptom of the body's health. Glancing away from the bottle, as Dou's doctor will do, we are also invited to look at the illustrated anatomy book by Vesalius—a visible and legible volume which contrasts with the pile of characteristically substantial but unreadable texts which Rembrandt has piled at the left in his *Aristotle*. The very execution of Dou's painting—the clear surface not marred by a single visible brushstroke—trusts to the look of visible things just as the doctor in the painting does. The alternative that Rembrandt's painting offers with its pitted and raised paint and the thoughtful and touching Aristotle is decisive.

But Rembrandt's appeal to the hand and to touch is motivated by more than a desire for physical activity and contact, strong though that is. The hand, after all, is the instrument of his profession; it is with the hand that a painter paints. Much has been written about Rembrandt's first important public commission in Amsterdam, his depiction of Dr. Nicholaes Tulp, praelector or lecturer in anatomy to the Amsterdam guild of surgeons, to whom he is offering an anatomical demonstration (fig. 1.22).[25] We know the name of each of the men portrayed, even that of the convict whose corpse was used on this occasion. The extraordinary veracity with which Rembrandt conveys the pallor of death is matched by his care in depicting the dissection. He follows the model of the portrait of Vesalius which served as the frontispiece to his famous illustrated anatomical text. Tulp, like Vesalius, is depicted dissecting the muscle and tendons in the forearm which serve to flex the fingers. It has only recently been pointed out that while the doctor's right hand exposes the muscles and tendons, his left hand is raised in a gesture which demonstrates their use. Tulp's left hand is not raised in a rhetorical gesture to accompany speech but to demonstrate that flexing of the fingers which enables us to hold or grasp objects. He is in effect demonstrating how we use our hand (fig. 1.23).

Why is Tulp in this painting demonstrating the function of the hand?[26] I am going to suggest that in this painting Rembrandt is concerned with the essential instrument of the painter. But though I think that is true, it is rushing things a bit to say it. For surely it was Tulp, not Rembrandt alone, who thought to have the grasping action of the hand made the center of the portrait of his anatomical demonstration. There was good reason for Tulp to do this, and it has to do not only with the model provided by Vesalius but also with the highly regarded writings of Aristotle. According to Aristotle the human hand was not a specialized instrument like the claw of a predator or the hooves of a herbivore. It was an instrument at a higher level, because it was not one instrument but many. It was an instrument for using instruments. Man, wrote Aristotle, has hands because he is the most intelligent animal. He thought of it as the physical counterpart of human reason, which was the instrument of the soul. For it was with the instrumental use of reason and the hand, particularly in its primary feature—the prehensile element that is demonstrated here—that, according to Aristotle, man had created civilization. If a painter, Rembrandt, for example, had wanted to define his particular profession, a profession that, because it was manual, had traditionally needed defense against the higher claims made for the intellectual liberal arts, what better way than focus upon the hand in Aristotle's terms as the instrumental sign of man's intelligence?

There was, then, a mutuality of interest between Tulp, a doctor, and Rembrandt, a painter, in the invention of this portrait which, I believe, led to the pictorial innovation of the prominent "demonstrating" grasp of Tulp's left hand.

If Rembrandt had specifically thought of the painter's hand in this instrumental way, did he ever attempt to paint it? Perhaps he did. And this could explain a particular feature of his *Self-Portrait* in Kenwood (fig. 1.24). There has been much discussion about how we might explain the two great circles that appear behind Rembrandt on the wall.[27] I do not propose to add anything to that discussion, but I do want to call attention to the painter's hand—or to what replaces his hand (fig. 1.25). It is an assemblage which, as a medical friend remarked, looks almost like a prosthetic device. It was in 1660, at the age of fifty-four, that Rembrandt, who was a committed self-portraitist, first painted his self-portrait as a painter. (I am ignoring the early painting in Boston which is less clearly a case of self-portraiture.) Rembrandt wears a painter's smock and rough, white cap. His right hand, the hand he actually painted with, is hidden, it is true, but his left hand has been replaced with a palette, brushes, and a maul stick. (X-rays show a certain amount of repainting, and they suggest that Rembrandt first put his materials in the hand to the left, the hand in which they would have appeared if viewed in a mirror.) It is, in fact, as if Rembrandt had constructed his hand out of the instruments that it employed for painting. The hand of the painter is represented in what, following Aristotle's definition, we might call its instrumental use. Let us read Aristotle: "Take the hand, this is as good as a talon, a claw, or a horn, or again a spear or a sword, or any other weapon or tool: it can be all of these, because it can seize and hold them all," to which Rembrandt the painter has now added it can be a palette, maulstick, and brushes, and he has painted it as such.[28]

Leo Steinberg has written something remarkably close to this about Picasso fashioning hands in the *Three Musicians* in Philadelphia: "He knows, or knew in 1921, that a man's hand may manifest itself as a rake or mallet, pincer, vise or broom; as cantilever or as decorative fringe. . . ."[29] We are accustomed to what we consider to be bodily distortions in the work of a painter of our own century like Picasso, and, indeed, in the medium of sculpture he produced assemblages of a similar type. Rembrandt also reconstructed the body and shared a common purpose—to represent a particular function. The point is less to claim Rembrandt for the moderns, than to argue the old-fashioned nature of the reconstructive art of Picasso. But the comparison to Picasso works both ways, since I mean to suggest by it that many things that have been taken as pictorial devices intended to achieve expressive effects in Rembrandt's

art—the deployment of light or the late brushwork—are constructive in nature.

To summarize: we have seen that Rembrandt's substantial (or "rough") paint calls attention to itself as work done in the studio; that touch is appealed to by the paint surface to represent the active apprehension of the world; that touch is enacted by the size and action of the hands in his paintings. Touch supplements sight as the primary vehicle of human contact, understanding, and love, and, in particular with the *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp* and the Kenwood *Self-Portrait* (but it is probably a more general phenomenon), Rembrandt's fascination with the hand is related to the instrumental role of the artist's hand in the making of pictures. It is, finally, just possible that in the curious etching known as *The Goldsmith* we can see how Rembrandt conjoined the hand's two roles—loving and painting—in an image of the artist at his work (fig. 1.26).

The tiny etching of 1655 depicts a goldsmith in his shop just putting the finishing touches to a figural group representing a woman (Charity, or Caritas) with two children. While his right hand works with the hammer to fasten the metal to its base, the artist lovingly embraces the woman with a huge left hand. His fingers press up against her thigh. Lest we doubt that this is meant as a gesture of embrace, note the way the goldsmith's cheek is bent to meet hers. The embrace could be called familial. This could be the portrayal of a man, his wife, and their children. But all the love and tenderness of the man, his embrace of the woman within the grip and caress of his hand, is bestowed on the statue he made. As an artist he bestows his love not on a real family, but on a surrogate one of his own making.

It was a topos of the time that the artist's engagement with his art was like the love of a man for his muse, his mistress, or, in some versions, his wife. In poems and paintings alike, this gives a certain authority to the painter or writer in love. The analogy was often made a matter of substitution: the artist's love of art replaces the love of other women in his life. And this was extended to a comparison between the making of a work of art and the engendering of a child. In response to a priest who told Michelangelo it was a pity that he had not married so as to leave the fruit of his labors to his children, Vasari has Michelangelo reply that his art is already a wife too many and that his works are his children. The story found its way into the north by way of Van Mander (who ends his life of Spranger with it), and it was repeated by Hoogstraten.[30]

In Dutch paintings, artists commonly worked the analogy art-wife to precisely the opposite end. It is one thing to say one's muse is like or even replaces a wife, and quite another thing to consider one's wife to be one's muse. But the Dutch artist often depicts his wife, sometimes even with his children, as such. There is a practical basis for this—family members served the artist as models. But in addition to overlapping with this practice, self-portraits in the company of "real" or depicted wife and/or family also engage certain notions of art. The topos as we have it from Vasari and Michelangelo does not anticipate that domestication of art that we find in self-portraits with family members by Dou, Metsu, Mieris, Jan de Baen, and others. Adriaen van der Werff even manages to extend this domestic representation of art into the artistocratic sphere. Bedecked with the gold chain awarded him for royal service, he includes a painting of his wife and daughter as Pictura and a Genius (?) in his *Self-Portrait* of 1699, a second version of one he made for the Medici collection of artists' self-portraits (fig. 1.27). For all the aura and imagery of the court, this painting is as much a tribute to his wife and children, who seem all but alive despite their pictorial state, as to his art. There is a difference between art being related to love, and painting being bound up with and confirming marriage and the household. One need not argue the point further, since Rembrandt makes this difference clear.[31]

The smock the goldsmith wears while he is working is like the one Rembrandt wears in his Kenwood *Self-Portrait* (and also, incidentally, like that worn by Aristotle). But this etching is not a self-portrait. Unlike many other Dutch artists, Rembrandt never depicted himself with wife and child. The closest he comes to it is in this etching where he displaces love of family onto love of his own art. It is unusual to find any acknowledgment of the misogynist potential of the topos: that art can serve an artist in place of a mistress and that he (rather than she!) can then give birth to works of art. In embracing the woman and her children as offspring of his own making, Rembrandt illustrates the misogynist desire as it was so frankly uttered by Montaigne in his essay *On the Affection of Fathers for their Children*, "I do not know whether I would not like much better to have produced one perfectly formed child by intercourse with the muses than by intercourse with my wife."[32] Eros, as we find it in the Pygmalion myth (to which this work might also be related), is transformed into an exercise of male generativity. Art so represented is not coextensive with the household and domestic life, but distinguished from it. This was a determining aspect of Rembrandt's studio operation. We shall return to it again in the chapters to follow.

There was, as far as we know, no group of this size cast in metal in Holland at this date. (Rembrandt probably fashioned the Caritas after a Beham engraving.) Why then did Rembrandt invent one? Because it presents in miniature an image of what Rembrandt conceived his art as being. Painters and sculptors in Europe had traditionally vied with each other for praise. Painters, for their part, had tried to equal sculptors by making figures within their paintings that were as solid and convincing as the three-dimensional works of the sculptor. In northern Europe this took the special form of the painted replication of sculpture that we find on the exterior of altarpieces from Van Eyck to Rubens. The painters effectively transformed sculpture so that it served their aim of deceiving the eyes of the beholder by representing the world in color and design on a flat surface. Don't be sculptural, be painterly and lifelike, was the message of Rubens's brief treatise on the painter's imitation of ancient statues.[33] Rembrandt, rather uniquely, tried instead to make something relieflike and solid out of painting. In the figure of the goldsmith with his statue he has accomplished his iconic aim. He is something of a sculptor manqué, like Picasso. (This might account for some of the satisfactions he found as a printmaker in working or "sculpting" the plates.) The statue that Rembrandt invents for the artist to embrace in this etching is the answer to his desire, or, if not the answer, a most explicit acknowledgment of it.

It is somewhat eccentric to attribute to a painter the desire to make a real object out of a painting. But we have the evidence of another Dutchman, Mondrian, who is on record as having said that he wanted his paintings to have a "real existence." He tried to achieve this by bringing the picture forward from the frame, mounting the painting on the frame so as to push it out into the viewer's space (fig. 1.28).[34] It is not inconsistent with the desire for this kind of objective presence, that Mondrian's paintings sacrificed the traditional pictorial illusion of both surface representation and depth. The distinctive format and facture of Rembrandt's late paintings—the life-size three-quarter-length frontally viewed figures worked up in thick pigments—can also be described as a record of a sacrifice. Considering the phenomenon in historical terms, one could say that Rembrandt's sculptural ambition plays back, or replays backwards, the account offered by Sixten Ringbom of the emergence of narrative scenes in northern painting out of icons or sculpted reliefs.[35]

My aim has been to direct attention to the distinctive manner of Rembrandt's touch. Basing our account on one feature of his way with his paint, we have teased out certain things about the formal and thematic presence of his paintings. Since the last century, a taste for Rembrandt has been a taste for the mysterious and the evocative—the romantic legend of his life has been extended to a romantic viewing of the art. Artists such as Soutine have been attracted to Rembrandt. But the viewing of the Dutch master's works that we see in Soutine's *Flayed Ox* separates the expressive from the constructive aspects of the painted surface as Rembrandt never did (fig. 1.29). The result is that while it might be thought that such paintings look Rembrandt-like, Rembrandt in fact does not apply the paint in this loose, expressive manner in any of his works. I used the word "constructive" on purpose. For I think the idiosyncratic invention of Rembrandt's late works is comparable to what Picasso did in 1907–10 (figs. 1.30, 1.31).

Rembrandt's final *Self-portrait* and Picasso's 1910 *Portrait of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler* offer a common frontality. The image confronts the viewer immediately and head-on. The darkness surrounding the figure in Rembrandt's late portraits is similar to the well-known fading-out around a cubist image such as this. As Picasso was to do after him, Rembrandt moved away from depicting actions to offer the act of painting itself as the performance we view. In Picasso's case, this is a turn from depicting performers to understanding that he himself is the performer. A similar account could be given of Rembrandt. In the works of both these artists, when the narrative frame is sacrificed, so is the organizing authority of the actual picture frame. Both artists assemble their images from the center out and therefore have a certain problem at the four corners. Both aim to capture the substance of the model before them. As painters they are both sculptors manqué. But while Picasso tried to subdue the sculptor in his painting and, post cubism, made it a separate and even a hidden enterprise, Rembrandt continued to press sculptural ambitions on his painting.[36]

The parallel with the cubist Picasso is unexpected, not only because of the time gap, but also because Rembrandt's pictorial invention, though of this order, did not get taken up, as did aspects of Picasso's cubism, to become the dominant style in the age to follow. But despite the idiosyncracy of Rembrandt's painting, it would be misleading to conclude that he lacked for understanding in his time. The spread of his style—which is marked in the number of paintings attributed to Rembrandt that we now know to have been done instead by others under his impress—is remarkable testimony to the contrary. If Rembrandt's manner of painting hardly outlived his presence, the isolate self that he invented in paint did. The idiosyncratic look of Rembrandt's paint with which we have been concerned entailed a claim to be distinguished, to stand apart, to be himself and, in the format of the mature paintings, to even constitute a self. This self was not forced on Rembrandt by the world around him—as the romantic view of the lonely, rejected artist would have it—but was very much his own invention. The place where Rembrandt staged its invention was in the studio.