

**H. Perry Chapman, *Rembrandt's Self-Portraits: A Study in Seventeenth-Century Identity*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990, \$39.50 (cloth)**

Michael Zell

Volume 17, numéro 1, 1990

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1073163ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073163ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Zell, M. (1990). Compte rendu de [H. Perry Chapman, *Rembrandt's Self-Portraits: A Study in Seventeenth-Century Identity*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990, \$39.50 (cloth)]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 17(1), 83–86. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073163ar>

iconoclasm or afterward on behalf of the angels. It was primarily a common-sense appeal to scripture and tradition. The angels were known to have appeared, to the Virgin for instance, been seen, and are therefore circumscribable. The images of angels are a minor key in the Christological debate. Like Christ's image, images of angels do not capture real natures, which are uncircumscribable, but only outward forms.

Finally, Pelikan uses "icon" throughout this book in ways which may jar readers since icon generally has a specific meaning in English. Unfortunately, this stretching of the semantic range of "icon" is only partly addressed in the final pages, where Pelikan discusses John of Damascus's chain of images. The icon, with various values, is involved in a great cosmology in John of Damascus's scheme. The chain begins with God who made the first icon, His Son and Logos, and secondly His "predeterminations"; in descending order He made man, who is an icon of God, the "names of God," "the special part of scripture," and lastly the material image as icon. Though relatively early in the debate, John of Damascus's cosmology is a proper climax to a work on the apologia for icons. It places the material image in a universal framework which exerted great influence during the controversy over images, a context to which Pelikan implicitly subscribes and which remains equally relevant today.

#### NOTES

- 1 Stephen Gero, *Byzantine Iconoclasm During the Reign of Leo III, with Particular Attention to the Oriental Sources* (Louisville, 1973).
- 2 Dietrich Stein, *Der Beginn des byzantinischen Bilderstreits und seine Entwicklung bis in die 40er Jahre des 8. Jahrhunderts* (Munich, 1980).
- 3 Hans Belting, *Bild und Kult. Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst* (Munich, 1990).
- 4 Sister Charles Murray, *Birth and Afterlife: A Study of the Transmutation of Some Pagan Imagery in Early Christian Funerary Art* (Oxford, 1981).

GLENN PEERS  
Johns Hopkins University

---

H. PERRY CHAPMAN *Rembrandt's Self-Portraits: A Study in Seventeenth-Century Identity*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990, \$39.50 (cloth).

From the very beginning of his career Rembrandt called attention to his own face. He assumed a variety of postures and guises in self-portrait paintings, etchings, and drawings, and by the end of his life these totalled over 70 works. As a whole, they form an altogether exceptional and provocative episode in the history of art. Earlier generations of art historians assumed autobiographical origins for the self-portraits and idolized their seemingly unconventional and profoundly human character, but these interpretations have largely fallen victim to a sweep of revisionist historicism that has dominated recent Rembrandt studies. Reacting to the subjective appreciation of these works, scholarship has tended to relegate them to a subordinate role in Rembrandt's

oeuvre, or to ignore them entirely. In studies of Rembrandt's conformity to the patronage system in Amsterdam, or his reliance on iconographic precedents, there has been little room for confrontation with the unusual character of the self-portraits.

In light of this, H. Perry Chapman's *Rembrandt's Self-Portraits: A Study in Seventeenth-Century Identity* comes as a welcome contribution to the field of Rembrandt scholarship. Seeking to reaffirm the wilful artistic and individual self-consciousness evident in Rembrandt's preoccupation with self-portraiture, she offers a corrective to the normative implications of the historicists' approach. In order to validate an assertion of independence as Rembrandt's meaningful response to his social and artistic milieu, Chapman locates the self-portrait within a wide cultural framework. She synthesizes a broad range of research, tracing the iconographic traditions of the genre, focusing on its identifiable attributes and invoking contemporary theoretical, literary, and theological sources. Credit is due to her for reacquainting us with the originality of Rembrandt's self-fashioning. She rightly underscores the lack of precedents for his formal self-portraits in working attire dating from the 1650s and 1660s, or, most extraordinary of all, the imposing self-portrait of 1658 in the Frick collection (Br. 50). Especially convincing is her interpretation of the heightened self-consciousness and profundity of Rembrandt's biblical role-playing in the *Raising of the Cross* (Br. 548), the *Self-Portrait as the Prodigal Son with Saskia* (Br. 30), and as St. Paul (Br. 59). Relating these pictures to similarly confessional and moralizing literature of the period, Chapman successfully places them within a context of a new Protestant self-consciousness.

A fundamental premise of the book is Chapman's revival of the notion that the self-portraits are indeed reflections of Rembrandt's psychological states occasioned by feelings of alienation and marginality from a hidebound social and cultural milieu. For her, seventeenth-century Dutch middle-class culture is irreconcilable with Rembrandt's ambition to be ranked with the greatest history painters. According to Chapman, "those socio-economic circumstances that gave Dutch painters greater artistic autonomy—freedom from a system of ecclesiastical and humanistically-inclined princely patronage—denied to them the very values on which the Renaissance artist had predicated his unprecedented sense of worth. For Rembrandt this called for a new conception of the artist" (p. 6). Her contention is that circumstances in bourgeois Holland necessitated Rembrandt's obsessive preoccupation with examining himself and his professional status in a "necessary process of identity formation or self-definition" (p. xvii).

In applying this problematic assumption Chapman posits that each self-portrait type represents a definite chronological step in Rembrandt's changing concept of selfhood. She isolates them from the rest of the artist's varied production and generates a developmental scheme in which she identifies two clearly distinguishable phases of self-examination. As one would suspect, the earlier period of Rembrandt's activity in self-portraiture is defined as an expression of "his protean, still unformed, concept of the self" (p. 8), an insecure posturing in imaginary guises, including the melancholic, the patriot-warrior, and in particular the aristocratic artist-virtuoso. Only twice, she correctly empha-

sizes, did Rembrandt depict himself as a contemporary gentleman, the most common type of self-portrait during this period. The celebrated *Self-Portrait at the Age of 34* of 1640 in London (Br. 34), modelled on Titian's so-called *Portrait of Ariosto* and Raphael's *Portrait of Castiglione*, represents the culmination of this early phase. A radical shift emerges with the etched *Self-Portrait Drawing at a Window* of 1648 (Br. 22), where he presents himself working in his studio. The fact that most of Rembrandt's colleagues deliberately avoided this kind of forthrightness in formal self-portraiture leads Chapman to identify this image, and the Vienna (Br. 42), Kenwood (Br. 52), and Paris (Br. 53) self-portraits in studio attire, as expressions of an inevitable breakthrough to self-recognition. With these works Rembrandt "discarded his Renaissance virtuosity for a more honest, more independent identity as an artist working with his tools" (p. 135). The only image he now projected was the "sovereign self" as an artist, free from the shackles of tradition, achieving a sense of worth purely through recognition of his own individual and professional autonomy. Chapman here modifies the old notion of an extroverted, youthful Rembrandt and an older, more profound character emerging in his maturity.

Such a definitive separation of the self-portraits into neat halves, with an identifiably critical turning point of the late 1640s, is unfortunately misleading. By arbitrarily imposing this determinist framework Chapman only highlights the fact that the self-portraits resist categorization. Rembrandt never "abandoned" his more imaginary mode of self-portraiture. The self-portraits in working attire were created simultaneously with the more fictional self-portrayals in the Frick (Br. 50), Washington (Br. 51), New York (Br. 54), the Uffizi (Br. 60), as St. Paul (Br. 59), and as Zeuxis (Br. 61), and Rembrandt continued this type right to his final year with the self-portraits of 1669 in London (Br. 55) and The Hague (Br. 62). Chapman confesses that the *Self-Portrait at the Age of 63* of 1669 in London employs the pose and rich, historical costuming of the 1640 self-portrait (Br. 34), the mode that he supposedly abandoned. However, she rather tortuously deduces that this repetition of the earlier composition only reveals that "after a career of grappling with artistic tradition, Rembrandt now draws on his own inner artistic repertory. His portraits have become self-reflective. Self-mastery is revealed in his now total self-sufficiency" (p. 130). Such a claim reflects a circuitous path of reasoning. The monumental breadth and expression of composure and sophistication of this pose continues to refer implicitly to Rembrandt's Italian Renaissance sources.

A critical shortcoming of Chapman's methodology is her isolation of the self-portraits and the presumption that they speak in a coherent and legible voice to a uniform audience. She presumes that they unproblematically articulate issues of artistic and professional identity. One could argue that all self-portraits, by definition, imply a self-reflexive content; this, however, does not address the parallels that often appear between Rembrandt's historical figures and the roles in which he casts himself in the self-portraits. The possibility of inherent multivalence, of the works' significance dependent on the characteristics of the audience and the con-

text in which they were collected and appreciated, is altogether ignored. Chapman does not clarify the situation for us partly because of the paucity of information regarding the works' reception during the seventeenth century; nevertheless, a fuller presentation and exploration of the variables would have greatly enhanced her writing.

This very narrow approach is notable in Chapter 1, where the early, expressive self-portraits are discussed in the light of the Horatian dictum that the artist should imaginatively transport himself to the scene of his subject; Chapman convincingly interprets these as demonstrations of Rembrandt's ability to convey "the passions" (p. 21). Her insistence, however, that the recurring shadow partially obscuring Rembrandt's eyes in these and other early self-portraits has the single purpose of denoting the melancholic temperament which contemporaries identified with artistic genius is too reductionist. I am inclined to agree that the arresting self-portrait in Berlin of 1634 (Br. 21), for example, seems to present a singularly dramatic and confrontational expression which is intensified by the device of the half-shaded face, and might well allude to a melancholic personality. Nonetheless, in his commissioned and historical portraits Rembrandt often cast a deep shadow on his subjects' faces, capturing through an expressive and subtle use of chiaroscuro effects the intangible complexity of thought and emotional life.

The least satisfactory of all Chapman's interpretations is her assertion in Chapter 2 that the self-portraits with martial attributes, such as the *Self-Portrait with Gorget and Helmet* in Kassel of 1634 (Br. 22), are patriotic displays of Rembrandt's allegiance to his homeland. No evidence exists to support this argument, which is predicated on such sweeping and unsubstantiated claims as "a wealth of martial imagery in art of the period suggests that fortitude and patriotism became tied to the Dutch artist's concept of his profession" (p. 36). Moreover, in treating the *Self-Portrait (?) with a Plumed Cap and Lowered Sabre* etching of 1634 (Br. 23) and the *Standard Bearer* of 1636 (Br. 433) as self-portraits, Chapman herself remarks that the effects of exoticism and valour dominate to such an extent that they "stretch the conventional limits of portraiture to the point where even likeness is ambiguous" (p. 36). One might reasonably ask, then, whether these particular works should be regarded as self-portraits at all.

In her determination to isolate the self-portraits and define their significance purely in terms of their relationship to Rembrandt's conception of his professional status, Chapman also overstates the significance of Rubens's Windsor *Self-Portrait* for Rembrandt. She maintains that this picture, through Paulus Pontius's engraving of 1630, served as the immediate and direct model for the *Self-Portrait in a Soft Hat and Embroidered Cloak* etching of 1631 (Br. 7) and the Glasgow *Self-Portrait as a Burgher* of 1632 (Br. 17). The Glasgow panel reveals no trace of the impact of the painting. The etching, with its tilted hat and elegant cloak draped over the shoulder, generally recalls Rubens's aristocratic self-portrait, but this does not indicate a direct connection. During the 1630s Rembrandt was adapting this more cosmopolitan, aristocratic mode to his portraits of the Dutch regents who were inundating his studio with commissions. The tilted hat and draped cloak also make

appearances in the formal *Portrait of a Man Rising from a Chair* of 1633 (Br. 172), the *Portrait of Marten Soolmans* of 1634 (Br. 199), and the *Portrait of a Man, Standing (Cornelis Witsen?)* of 1639 (Br. 216).

One of the more provocative interpretations Chapman poses is also marred by this limited perspective. The greater part of her discussion of the earlier phase in Rembrandt's self-fashioning in Chapters 2 and 3 is devoted to demonstrating his preoccupation with a struggle to associate himself with the Renaissance ideal of the artist as a gentleman-virtuoso. She provides as examples the self-portrait in Liverpool of 1630-31 (Br. 12) and two self-portraits of 1633 in the Louvre (Br. 18 and 19), where Rembrandt appears in elegant furs, gold chains, and (in two cases) wears a beret. The chains identify for her Rembrandt's emulation of a self-portrait type, specifically Rubens's *Windsor Self-Portrait*, where the artist presents himself as the recipient of aristocratic privilege. By appropriating the chains, marks of distinction that he would never receive, and emphasizing the imaginary character of these images in their rich, archaic dress, Chapman believes Rembrandt was abstracting the type into a claim for artistic honour. She argues that in these pictures "Rembrandt fashioned himself not as an honored gentleman but as an artist of Honor, claiming nobility solely on the basis of his personal artistic excellence. . . . He changed social into professional standing" (p. 69).

This reading attractively fits the *Self-Portrait Leaning on a Stone Sill* etching of 1639 (Br. 21) and the *Self-Portrait at the Age of 34* of 1640 (Br. 4), modelled on Titian and Raphael, the archetypes of the courtly artistic ideal, to a developing type of self-portraiture in his oeuvre. As a result, they appear less as unexpected and isolated statements. However, Chapman is too categorical in claiming to have deciphered the absolute meaning of the chains in the Liverpool and Louvre paintings, and this undermines her argument. She does not account for the appearance of chains as decorative flourishes in a number of Rembrandt's *tronies* or heads of exotically-dressed men, such as the *Old Man in a Gorget and Black Cap* of 1631 (Br. 81), the *Man in "Polish Costume"* of 1637 (Br. 211), or the etching of *The Persian* of 1632 (Br. 152). Rembrandt also presented himself as one of these oriental figures in 1631 in the self-portrait in the Petit-Palais (Br. 16). The taste for representations of such exotic figures has a greater role to play than Chapman admits. In the case of the Liverpool self-portrait, it is significant that when inventoried in Charles I's collection in 1639, it was recognized as a self-portrait, suggesting that in this courtly context, alive to Rembrandt's aesthetic and professional concerns, an allusion to artistic honour might have been discriminated. In another setting, however, the picture might have been appreciated as a rather fanciful, imaginary head.

Chapman's premise that the social and cultural climate characteristic of seventeenth-century Amsterdam frustrated Rembrandt's lofty ambitions is a central misunderstanding throughout the book. On the contrary, there clearly existed within the city's elite a circle of intellectuals, poets, dilettantes, and connoisseurs who cultivated sophisticated artistic tastes, and some of these men were on intimate terms with Rembrandt. The early acclaim for the artist's histories by Constantin Huygens and Philips Angel, among others, confirms that he

found an audience capable of appreciating and encouraging his devotion to the depiction of significant historical subjects, as do his relations with Jan Six. Such contacts continued through the last decade of his career. In a letter of 1663, Constantin Huygens II suggests that his brother Christian visit Everhard Jabach's collection in Paris in order to sketch a landscape drawing by Annibale Carracci so that he might compare it with one he had admired in Rembrandt's possession: "Je voudrais que si vous voyez cela vous en fissiez vittement un petit brouillon . . . pour scauoir un peu vray si celuy qu'a Rembrandt à Amsterdam . . . du mesme maistre n'est pas une copie, ce que je ne croy pourtant pas pour l'hardiesse de la plume."<sup>1</sup>

Chapman's approach obscures and distorts this elite's, and even Rembrandt's own, identification with Renaissance, classicist values. At one point she pronounces that Rembrandt exhibits "a lifelong lack of real affinity for Antiquity" (p. 66). While his stance toward the classical ideal was anything but convention and can be, at times, irreverent, ironic, and even humorous, this should not deny the intensity of the artist's ambition to reconcile classical precepts to a Northern tradition of naturalism, nor the capacity of at least some clients and intimates to appreciate this endeavour. Even Rembrandt's commissioned portraits display the forceful dramatic unity of the history painting. As Slive and Emmens have shown, the principles of classicism had not yet been regularized and codified into an explicit aesthetic doctrine that would condemn an approach such as Rembrandt's as indecorous and ignorant.

The self-portraits resist Chapman's attempts to categorize them into developmental stages of self-definition, progressing, as she writes, "from inner anarchy to inner authority and greater autonomy" (p. 105). The very range they exhibit, from the explicitly fanciful to the audaciously straightforward, displays the astonishing fertility of Rembrandt's imagination in conflating and manipulating artistic traditions. In a sense, they metaphorically embody the artistic virtue Hoogstraten, Rembrandt's pupil, characterized as *keurlijke natuurlijkheid* or selective naturalism. Sometimes leaning more toward the "natural" end of the spectrum, sometimes toward the more imaginative, each answers to the contemporary appreciation for the adaptation of the natural, experiential world to the artist's imaginative powers. As Emmens suggested, the self-portraits can be regarded as manifestations of Rembrandt's *ingenium*, or his artistic skill in creating and performing various roles.<sup>2</sup> Drawing attention to himself in these remarkable art-works and displaying the full range of his talents, Rembrandt shows us that the ideal of the unbridled creative genius was not the invention of the Romantic period. Salvator Rosa, Rembrandt's contemporary, also exploited both in his art and career the image of the independent artist-virtuoso and genius. It was only during the nineteenth century that this ideal was developed into a thoroughgoing and revolutionary aesthetic credo. Though too transparently biased in her assessment, Chapman is justified in her conclusion that "unbeknownst to himself or his critics . . . [Rembrandt] was fighting a new battle for artistic independence, one that was only begun and would not be fully won until the Romantic age" (p. 134). Perhaps the combination of an open art market, and the cultivation of sophisticated

aesthetic tastes among Amsterdam's elite, created an atmosphere in which Rembrandt could best operate as an independent artist-virtuoso. He satisfied as well as determined his market with performances of exceptional virtuosity.

#### NOTES

- 1 C. Hofstede de Groot, *Die Urkunden über Rembrandt*, The Hague, 1906, no. 261, and S. Slive, *Rembrandt and His Critics: 1630-1730*, The Hague, 1953, 42-43.
- 2 J. A. Emmens, *Rembrandt en de Regels van de Kunst*, Amsterdam, 1979 (reprint of Utrecht, 1968), 230-31 and 287.

MICHAEL ZELL  
*Harvard University*

---

#### LIVRES REÇUS / BOOKS RECEIVED

---

BROWN, PATRICIA FORTINI *Venetian Narrative Painting in the Age of Carpaccio*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990. \$24.95 (paper).

CONNOR, CAROLYN L. *Art and Miracles in Medieval Byzantium*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991. \$65.00 (cloth).

FRUGONI, CHIARA *A Distant City: Images of Urban Experience in the Medieval World*. Translated by William McCuaig. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991. \$39.50 (cloth).

HAYMAN, JOHN. *John Ruskin and Switzerland*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1990. \$35.95.

HELD, JULIUS S. *Rembrandt Studies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991. \$24.95 (paper).

HILLS, PAUL *The Light of Early Italian Painting*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990. \$14.95 (paper).

JOHNS, ELIZABETH *Thomas Eakins: The Heroism of Modern Life*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983. \$22.50 (paper).

KIRSCH, EDITH W. *Five Illuminated Manuscripts of Giangaleazzo Visconti*. University Park: Penn State Press, 1991. \$39.50 (cloth).

NICHOLSON, KATHLEEN *Turner's Classical Landscapes: Myth and Meaning*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990. \$50.00 (cloth).

PERLOVE, SHELLEY KAREN *Bernini and the Idealization of Death: The Blessed Ludovica Albertoni and the Altieri Chapel*. University Park: Penn State Press, 1990. \$32.50 (cloth).

SCHNEIDER, CYNTHIA P. *Rembrandt's Landscapes*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990. \$50.00 (cloth).

WAGNER, ANNE MIDDLETON *Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux: Sculptor of the Second Empire*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990 (1986). \$24.95 (paper).