

Rem'brandt™ ©

or Naming is the name of the game

*dedicated to Richard Schindler and Gary Schwartz
my remote mentors and first readers*

A name is a word. A signature is the graphic form of a name and, like the Greek verb *graphein* implies, it is at the same time something written and something drawn. It is the interface between the verbal and the visual, language and image, text and presence, a part that stands for the whole. Considering the fact that so many signatures are illegible and entirely different in appearance from the usual handwriting of the signer, they can be seen as a combination of script and pictogram: a symbol of the name. The literal content of the signature—the name in writing—has given way to pictorial forces that continue to act even when the form has long been fixed into a suitable "composition." Although graphological interpretations can always be called into question, the fact remains that the act of writing and signing by hand produces forms that are individual, expressive and meaningful to the signer.

Rembrandt, who benefitted from at least seven years of schooling (1613-20), and possibly even attended university, was a very literate man, much more so than any other painter of his time. The ability to write in the 17th-century United Provinces was not just a practical expedient or a product of education, it was also cultivated as a highly respected and appreciated art form called *Schrijftkunst*, or Calligraphy. This was certainly the first art that Rembrandt ever mastered and practiced. While he ultimately became a painter and engraver, it would not be unreasonable to think that his signature was an object of special attention and significance for him. All the more so as the act of signing lies halfway between the precision of engraving and the broader gestures of painting. In all three—painting, engraving and signing—care must be taken to form the parts without losing sight of the composition as a whole.

If a signature can be said to be expressive of identity, as an image or symbol of the whole person, then it is not surprising to find Rembrandt, who devoted so much time to his pictorial identity in his self-portraits, also devoting a great deal of attention to this graphic sign of his identity.

His efforts in this respect are evidenced by three facts: 1) the shape that he gave to his initial "R" starting in 1629, 2) his changing the form of his signature four times between 1629 and 1633, and 3) his establishing a definitive form of his signature in 1633 by using his first name enhanced with a "d." To this could be added the fact of his retrodating and re-signing certain works in 1632, which was the decisive year for the design of his signature, for he used three signature types successively. It was also the year in which his production both of etchings and of self-portraits (primarily etched until then) plummeted. Even if this drop may be explained by external circumstances—like his thriving portrait business—the coincidence permits a relation to be made between his use of the etching medium, his practice of self-portraiture and his attention to his signature at this particular time. In 1632, therefore, his first year as a successful master in Amsterdam, a special set of psychological and existential conditions obtained to make him focus his attention on his name—his identity in writing—and on its graphic expression—his signature.

As I said, a signature combines features of both writing and drawing. This means that there is also a pictorial aspect to letter forms, as we can see by the fact that so many alphabets and writing systems were developed from pictograms. Any person who can write an "S" can also draw a plausible snake. At the same time, this person does not need to know that this serpentine shape—called the "Line of Beauty" by Hogarth—was a much discussed topic in artistic and literary circles in Antiquity and later. Initial letters in particular have been elaborated into images from the age of the medieval manuscript illuminators down to the logosmiths and graffiti artists of our day. There is in fact an unbroken tradition of associating letters of the alphabet with images.

Which brings me to an aspect of the interaction between words and images that will probably be as difficult for the rationally inclined to integrate as it was for me to conceptualize: compositions from 1631-34 and a certain detail in the Anatomy lesson that seem to have been informed by Rembrandt's preoccupation with his name and signature. Generally speaking, not only academic scholarship but also art historians like to keep words and images distinct, subordinating images to words and relegating them to a secondary role as illustrations. A visual artist is not bound to such constraints, and while it is not the rule to see artists openly and systematically indulging in the "play" between words and images, this play does exist, as it does between *attention* and *intention*. Although signatures are self-evident and even more than welcome, their presence in the pictorial space is mostly an unexamined event that often leads to irrational effects depending on our degree of identification with the names to which they refer.

This sleight-of-eye and psyche can take many forms, which may be called visual "conceits," to use an archaic and fittingly ambiguous term. It is not surprising to find evidence of them in an artist as visually sophisticated, verbally educated and self-aware as Rembrandt. The question of whether he generated these conceits deliberately (consciously) or spontaneously (unconsciously) is academic, because these phenomena occur at a threshold where attention must shift between doing and seeing, in the same way that vision can shift between 2-dimensional graphic

and 3-dimensional illusionistic modes. Both full awareness and a blind spot will foster the conditions for their expression, detection, or concealment. A signature can hide a personality in plain sight.

I began my research over twenty-five years ago with a Rembrandt painting at the Louvre that raised fundamental questions about the perception and interpretation of works of art. When the painting was unilaterally disattributed by the Rembrandt Research Project in 1986 I was given a demonstration of how easily and arbitrarily an object of study could be argued into or out of existence. As if I needed further proof of the motto: *what you see is what you don't get*. It was at this point that I recognized that there is no brighter and no blinder spot than the NAME: naming is indeed the name of the game. The name as elementary particle (or wave) of the intellect, extremely sensitive to effects of relativity. Born too soon to benefit from "Cultural Analysis" and unable to master such discourses as Psychoanalysis, Phenomenology and Semiotics, I used the painting and Rembrandt's name as my map and touchstone. Along the way I had to trust my own perception, intuition and the mind's heuristic ability when it is unfettered by academic conventions and personal ambitions. Not being affiliated with any institution, and not needing to illustrate or prove any special theory, I proceeded empirically, collecting information and observations, questioning everything up to and including my own questions.

When I finally started working my notes up ten years ago, I was aware of the limitations of a monologue that was dazzled at times by its own horizons and tempted at others by its own conclusions. I therefore decided to present my research as a work in progress, as so much food for thought, in the form of 72 entries devoted to Rembrandt's name and signatures as well as to related topics. They are cross-referenced wherever possible and, in principle, may be read in any order.

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foto:jmc