

1632 - THE ETCHINGS

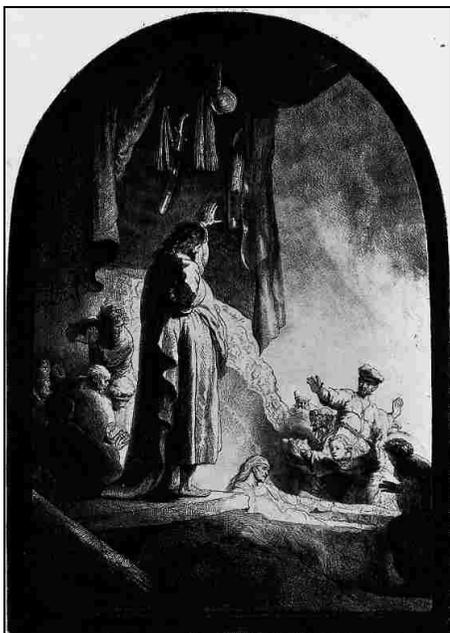


As you may remember, 1632 was the pivotal year in Rembrandt's career: his horizons had broadened to The Hague and Amsterdam, where his services as skilled portraitist were much in demand. His signatures on the paintings from that year present a fairly cogent development that includes the last "RHL" monograms (for example, on the Portrait of Marten Looten, Br. 166, entry 13, and on the Head of an old man, Br. 148, entry 8), then comes a long series of the monogram plus patronym type, "RHL - van Ryn," before going on to the original first-name form, "Rembrant," of which only a few specimens exist with the date 1632 (see entries 41 and 50).

In the case of his etchings, this pattern does not hold as well. While the years 1630-31 saw a large production of etchings (31 signed and dated pieces), peaking in 1630, the year 1632 presents a drastic drop (down to 3 or 4 pieces). This is easily explained by Rembrandt's involvement in the portrait business with Hendrick Uylenburgh, which was to dominate his production in 1632-33 (around 50 paintings). Etching, which until then had served as his preferred medium for self-portraiture, lapsed apace in 1632, and there was only one painted self-portrait (Br. 17). I wager that he was too busy working on the details of his embroidered cloak of his Self-portrait in the B 7 etching (see entry 3), which ran through a record eleven states. He made up for lost time in that department soon enough, in 1633 and 1634 (see entry 42).

The etchings from 1632 include an Oriental Figure (B 152, above) and the Rat-poison Vendor (right; B 121), both of which are signed "RHL 1632," with the last two digits reversed in both cases. Then there is a very large-format Raising of Lazarus (B 73, left), which is signed "RHL- v. Rijn ft." (and undated)—a unique signature in Rembrandt's work. Note that the second "R" has the loop that Rembrandt used for his initial, while the letters "ijn" or "yn" seem reversed. Finally there is a St. Jerome Praying (B 101) that presents his first-name in its original form, "Rembrant ft.-1632" (see figs. entry 12). Note



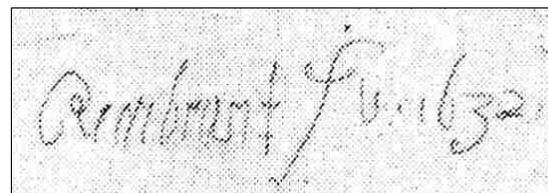


that the shape of the letter "b" there is the same as in the first versions of this signature type in his paintings and etchings, that is, with a straight stem. In 1633 Rembrandt fine-tuned his name, using what A.J. Adams calls the Dutch Civilité script for this letter (see entry 21) and adding a "d."

What to make of the fact that there are no etchings signed with the monogram plus patronym form—"RHL- van Rijn"—that seems to have been standard for the paintings in 1632? The closest we have is the abbreviated version on the Lazarus (B 73) mentioned above, a formulation that recalls those to be found on Jan Jorisz van Vliet's engraved reproductions of Rembrandt's history compositions from 1630-31. This absence might be due to the fact that the bulk of his production in 1632 was devoted to painting portraits. Only two etchings were executed at the beginning of the year (hence the reversed digits on B 121 and 152), the last touches on B 73 were probably given soon thereafter (hence the incomplete form of the patronym), and the St. Jerome was done at the close of the year, when Rembran[d]t had finally begun to sign in the first person singular. Whether or not this new signature made its first appearance on this particular etching, it was surely simpler than having to write "RHL-van Rijn" backwards on the plate.

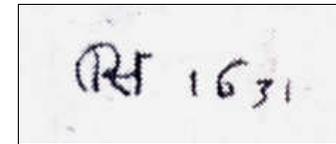


I tend to think that the etching medium served as a laboratory for the elaboration of his signature because the proportion of signatures there is greater than on the paintings: in Gary Schwartz's 1977 catalogue, I counted 196 signed and 92 unsigned etchings. The lapse of time between completion and signature is generally shorter for an etching than for a painting, and more direct because it is the plate—not the print—that is signed. It is easier to add a signature to a painting posthumously than to an etching, unless one has the plate; yet this is a risky venture. Etching is closer to writing than to painting and the signature must be written backwards, which requires greater skill and attention. This will, in turn, promote a more acute awareness of the name, as well as more visual versatility and manual dexterity: consider the change of scale in switching from an etching plate to a canvas. The technical prerequisites for printmaking involve several parties, and it may well have been in van Vliet's printshop that



Rembrandt and Lievens rubbed elbows and egos the most closely (see entry 26). The inscriptions on engraved copies made sure to give credit to the various parties involved. Finally, there was no better way to spread one's name throughout Europe than by producing prints.

The "RHL" monogram made its first appearance on etchings in 1628 (B 352 and 354), one year before it was used on paintings. Further evidence of experimentation in signing etchings is Rembrandt's use of an "RL" monogram; that is, the standard monogram without a crossbar. These appear only on etchings dated in 1630-32 (B 1, 51, 142, 165, 292, 311, 320, 321 and 349) and might either be evidence of a collaboration with Jan Lievens, or at least of a half-hearted attempt at keeping things straight. Then there are the two etchings dated 1631 (B 134 and B 171) that present what seems to be an "RH" or "RI" monogram (usually read "Rt"). But since the style of etching and writing there is so stiff and the form reminiscent of van Vliet's inscriptions on his reproductions, one need look no further.



If Rembrandt's etching activity was so closely linked to van Vliet and Leiden, it is no wonder that his production declined in 1632 and that he felt the need then to flesh out his identity in his signatures (see entry 42).



Table of signatures from Münz's catalogue of the etchings.