

## GIVE ME AN "F"

I have long wondered how Rembrandt came to the very peculiar shape of the letter "f" he used as an abbreviation for "*fecit*" ("he made")

Although occasionally found accompanying some of his earliest and simplest signatures—the initial R—this feature took hold relatively late, in 1631-32. It made its first regular appearance in the etchings in combination with the "RHL" monogram (B 201, B 262 and B 343), but without mention of the date. These three etchings, two of which depict an old man and an old woman (signatures reproduced opposite, top) are all dated around 1631. The lack of date might indicate an experiment on Rembrandt's part or some funny business, because it is unusual, especially three times in a row on nearly identical formats. This was just at the time that the supposed joint venture in Leiden involving Lievens, Rembrandt and Jan Jorisz. van Vliet was coming apart at the seams (see entry 26).

The next time we see the "f," it is combined with the shortened patronym on the Raising of Lazarus etching (B 73; see opposite, middle right). The collaboration with van Vliet, which is well documented, will no doubt have sensitized Rembrandt to the use of abbreviations, because they regularly appeared in the credit lines on engraved reproductions of paintings: "*in(v)*," for "*inventor*" and "*pinx.*" for "*pinxit*," that is, "he painted."



In any case, at some time in 1632, presumably just when other artists were beginning to assist Rembrandt with his portrait commissions, it seemed necessary not only to spell out "who-did-it" but also to call attention to the "doing" of it. Hence "*fecit*," abbreviated to "ft" by a v-shaped stroke or series of dots, and ultimately reduced to a calligraphic "f." The first instances of this abbreviation combined with his first name in its original version, as in the St. Jerome etching (B 101, see entries 6 and 12), is done in a

straightforward manner: an oblique sinuous line with a crossbar (below, 2nd from top, left). But by the time he has worked out the "Rembrandt" form in 1633 (opposite), he has given it a much more dashing ductus, closer to a sketched emblem than to a letter. It is done in a single stroke, like the R, starting just where one would expect it to finish: at the crossbar. The whole makes for a kind of dynamic underlining after the deliberate spelling out of his name. In addition to its graphic economy, it has the swashbuckling flourish of the famous "Z" of Zorro. The sword



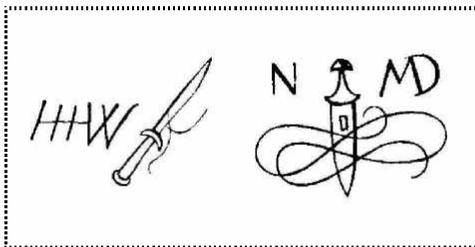
imagery is no coincidence. Nothing looks more like an "f" than a saber or scimitar, and there happens to be one hanging conspicuously in the Lazarus etching (and related painting, Br. 538, ca. 1630, right) mentioned above.



I wager that this formal analogy—and virile metaphor of the act of painting—was not lost on the artist himself, considering the etymology of his name and the nexus of martial imagery associated with the painter's profession (see entries 39, 63 and 64). The Dutch name for painter, "schilder," is directly related to the word for shield, a throwback to the times when painting coats-of-arms was about all there was for lay painters to paint. Whether he served on the civil guard or not—as he should have—Rembrandt depicted himself with a gorget during his Leiden period, and in later years with a sword (including in 1661 as the Apostle Paul, see entry 64).

Plays on words and images in artists' monograms are infrequent, but not that difficult to find, especially in the 16th century, as we have seen with Dürer (see entry 5). For example, Giovanni *Dossi* included a

bone in his monogram, Ludger Tom *Ring* a ring, Hans Leonhard *Schäufelein* a small shovel, and Hans *Schöpfer* the Elder a ladle, all pictograms of their last names. Closer to my point, at least three



Swiss artists incorporated the emblem of a dagger into their monograms, including the engraver and soldier-of-fortune Urs Graf: Hans Heinrich Wegman and Niklaus Manuel Deutsch (both above).

Rembrandt's definitive signature thus takes on an emblematic as well as a personal character (see entry 39). A *further* emblematic character, in fact, for the form and execution of the initial "R" can also be interpreted pictographically as far as one cares to fetch (skull, palette, beret).

It was while researching the shape of the upper-case "R" in Netherlandish cursive script from the late Middle Ages to the 17th century that I came upon a curious analogy. During this time span, one can observe the development of a properly Netherlandish shaping of the letter "R" which, in its extreme form, does not look remotely like the capital Roman "R" that we know so well (see right and left). In the figure on the next page, left, bottom, we see Rembrandt's name written by another hand in 1653 using this form. Rembrandt himself made discrete use of this letter form—alongside his ever flamboyant "R"—in the capital of "Rijn" when he signed the five apprentice receipts for Isaack Jouderville in 1630-31 (see next page, left).



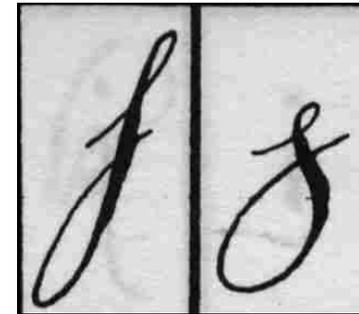
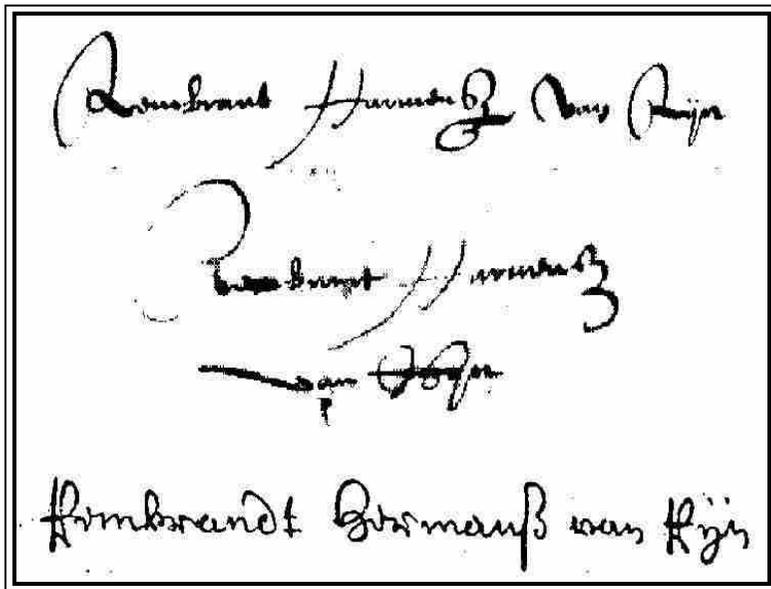
Spanning a period of one and a half years immediately following the death of his father, four of them display an almost pedantic insistence on his origins and a rather convoluted treatment of the capital for "Rijn" (November 1631, next page, left, middle). The first receipt,

dated May 1, 1630, and presumably drawn up several days after the funeral is an exception (next page, left, top). This symbolic attachment to his family will be expressed again in his appending the patronymic to his monogram in 1632.

What struck me, however, was not just the form of this so-called Gothic letter, but also the way it seems to have been drawn: in one stroke ending with an elbowed crossbar like the one in Rembrandt's "f." Thus the "f" of "fecit" could be very well be seen as another version of the "R." In a sense, the second "R" and the reference to his father that fell away when he dropped the "van Rijn" survive in this archaic form. This pattern of Rembrandt adding something else when something has been dropped also manifested itself in the addition of the letter "d" to his first name in 1633.



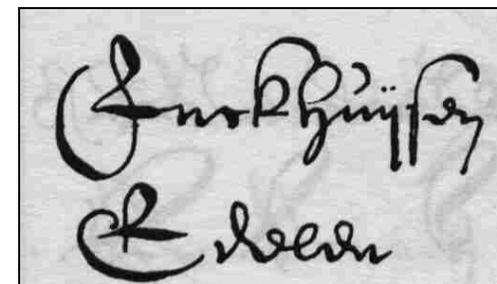
If this sounds far fetched, take another look at the "H" of "Harmensz" in the signatures from 1630-31 below: it is a Roman Italic capital and displays the same slant and extension as the "f" to come. Considering the fact that Rembrandt's "f" often had a tiny hook attached to it (usually explained as the miniaturized "t" of "fecit"), we could also say that it was a highly idiosyncratic, evolved form of the "H," which in minuscule Gothic script had a sharply oblique shape, somewhat like an "f" (opposite, top). However, this little hook in the "f" was in fact a loop that belonged to a form of the Gothic cursive "F" (see opposite, middle). Even worse, there was a capital form of the Gothic "E" that had more than a passing resemblance to Rembrandt's "f" and yet another form that could be taken for an archaic "R" (opposite, bottom). Whether he was showing off his education or asserting his individuality, Rembrandt's handwritten signatures display an original blend of archaic and humanistic letter forms (see entry 21). All in all, handwriting in 17th century Holland seems not only to have been a fine art, but an occult science as well.



17th-cent. Dutch minuscule "h" forms



17th-cent. Dutch capital "F" forms



17th-cent. Dutch capital "E" forms

from "Het Nederlandsche Handschrift in 1600", W. Bogtman, Haarlem 1973