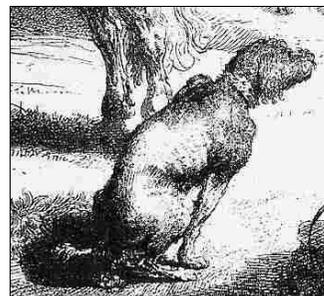


HOW FAR CAN YOU FETCH?

"I am I because my little dog knows me."
Gertrude Stein

The reader may remember how much meaning I managed to milk out of Rembrandt's Self-portrait with a poodle (Br. 16, see entry 36). It bears the signature and date "Rembrant.ft.1631," which means that it was signed in all likelihood in late 1632 or early 1633, and so it documents one of Rembrandt very first *first-name* signatures on a painting. The poodle (middle, right) may also have been added at this later stage, when Rembrandt's new identity was still shaky and in need of company. This is also why I think it stands emblematically for his old monogramme, which he had just abandoned after having tried to give it company too, as "RHL-van Rijn". His next self-portrait probably appears in an etching (B 17) signed "Rembrandt" and dated 1633, which I reproduce here reversed, as Rembrandt drew it on the plate, to bring out the hand-dog quality of his bearing (top, right). This is the only etched self-portrait dated 1633 and it stands in sharp contrast to his two painted self-portraits from that year (Br. 18 and Br. 19, both in the Louvre), in which he tried out a more authoritative presence (see figs. entry 2). Both his ups and downs seem to have been valid subjects for esthetic processing.

This canine correspondence recurs in an unexpected form in an etching inscribed ".Rembrandt.inventor.et.feecit.1633." (B 90, next page). Significantly, there is a first state of this rendition of The good Samaritan that bears the date 1632 (Rijksprentenkabinett). The cumbersome inscription, which the artist used only twice (cf. B 52, 1633), may have been Rembrandt's declaration of independence from other people reproducing his works, like Van Vliet in Leiden. Its pompous character is flatly contradicted by the presence of a dog shitting in the foreground. This dog seems to have been shorn, bears a certain resemblance to the poodle in Br. 16., but does not appear in the painted version of this same subject (Br. 545, London, Wallace Collection). It plays a conspicuous part in the composition and was



clearly not meant to be ignored. You could even say that, given its placement, it almost "signs" the scene. This detail is so shocking that early commentators considered it to be a prank played by one of Rembrandt's pupils. This means that it was understood to be a comment of sorts, and not merely incidental.

Goethe, who devoted a few pages to this etching under the curious title Rembrandt the thinker (1827), went into great detail in describing the facial expressions of the various figures, sublimely ignoring the hound. But its perverse effect was not lost on the Great Poet, for he went so far as to re-interpret the scene (and so the biblical account) by identifying the figure at the window as the ringleader of the gang that had robbed the pilgrim, who is thus depicted being re-delivered into their hands. In that case, the dog could just as well be read as Rembrandt's preventive comment on misrepresentations of his work (see entry34).

But what was Rembrandt really trying to prove with this dog defecating in a scene about Christian charity and justice? Had he been "shorn" in his business dealings in Leiden and rescued in Amsterdam by Uylenburgh? At the very least, this symptomatic detail proves that during the key transformative years 1632-33, Rembrandt did not shrink from introducing grossly incongruous details into his pictures, details that surely had a personal meaning (see also entries 36 and 51).

The attentive viewer may have noticed the curving dynamic and grouping of the scene, a characteristic of Rembrandt's etched and painted compositions in 1631-32 (see entries 11 and 12). Personally, I would have no trouble tracing the form of the "R" onto this scene, starting with the face of the man carrying the waylaid pilgrim. It basically requires seeing it as a 2-dimensional form, and not being taken in by the illusion of depth. Form begetting form.

