

WHO WAS MAX LAUTNER?

The much-maligned author of a controversial, yet not entirely worthless book published in Breslau in 1891 with the thought-provoking title Wer ist Rembrandt? and the pretension to be the *Grundlagen zu einem Neubau der holländischen Kunstgeschichte*.

Raising the question "who is Rembrandt?" at a time when the artist's oeuvre was piling up to some seven hundred paintings was a daring and healthy thing to do. Had he left it at that, Max Lautner would have gone into history as a hero of sorts. As it was, he wasted the energy that he had liberated by overshooting the mark.

Here are his main theses: 1) Rembrandt could not possibly have painted (and presumably sold) so many paintings in his lifetime and yet been driven to bankruptcy, much less poverty, 2) the documentary evidence points to a very problematic personality lacking the character to create masterpieces of great human depth, and 3) only Ferdinand Bol had the necessary talent and moral fiber to paint them. In addition to his *ad hominem* argumentation, Lautner marshalls photographic evidence produced by a "reinforcing" process of his own invention (elft undisclosed) to reveal the presence of "latent" Bol signatures, sometimes several on a single painting. This was allegedly Bol's tactic to circumvent Rembrandt's policy of appropriating the best work of his students. Max the iconoclast did not hold back, going so far as to assign the authorship of the Nightwatch to Bol, the archival record notwithstanding.

Lautner's book, which "placed a small petard under the European world of Art, and [gave] it a hoist to starboard" (Elbert Hubbard), also unleashed a storm of indignation and ridicule among the official experts in Berlin, Amsterdam and Paris. Max didn't stand a chance, all the less as he provided his critics with the ammunition for his own demise: his knowledge of the Rembrandt literature was quite good, but unable to withstand the concerted erudition wielded by the Rembrandt "doctors" in their counteroffensive. Yet his question remains valid, and his pioneer effort to

deflate the Rembrandt catalogue proved to be the path followed by future generations. Like his contemporary, John C. Van Dyke (see entry 69), who must have read him, and unlike the majority of institutional art historians, his analysis of the role played by art dealers and professional connoisseurs in inflating Rembrandt's catalogue and attracting well-heeled attention to his name is as plausible as it is sobering (see also entry 57). It suggests a rationale for the mystification and confusion that continues to plague the "*Rembrandt Autorbegriff*," a term coined by Lautner to distinguish the idea or concept of Rembrandt's authorship from the actual author.

So far I have been able to find next to nothing about Max Lautner, the man, who seems to have slipped into oblivion as swiftly as he had appeared. His name is being mentioned in Germany again—still with the requisite condescension—to spice up Rembrandt's otherwise stuffy *Rezeptionsgeschichte*. Here is what Elbert Hubbard, an American amateur, had to say in 1902:

I know just why Professor Lautner believes that Rembrandt never could have painted a picture with a deep, tender, subtle and spiritual significance. Professor Lautner averages fairly well, he labors hard to be consistent, but his thought gamut runs just from

Bottom the weaver to Dogberry the judge. He is a cauliflower—that is to say, a cabbage with a college education.

Yes, I understand him, because for most of the time I myself am supremely dull, childishly dogmatic, beautifully self-complacent.

I am Lautner.

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This is a fair and democratic conclusion, even if it smacks of Walt Whitman and presumes a sartrian inversion of the ego à la *je-est-un-autre*, the implications of which few, if any, are able to pursue with any consistency. According to this premise, Lautner could just as well have said: I know, because I am Rembrandt, had he not much preferred to say: I am Bol. There is no evidence that he ever professed what he preached: as far as I know, he was a lawyer..

I will take advantage of the growing muddle of egos to ask the reader to try to imagine what it feels like to examine or restore a well-pedigreed painting with a Rembrandt signature on it only to discover the lineaments of another artist's signature underneath. This is not fiction, but fact, for it has happened time and time again. What is one to think? Forget, if you can, the millions of dollars or the reputations and institutional prestige that may be at stake; wouldn't you feel cheated? But by whom: Rembrandt? the art market? the System? your Unconscious?

This is where the Big Question comes in: if Rembrandt really was so peerless a painter, one of the greatest of all time, then how on earth could the work of a second- to third-rate master ever be mistaken for one of his own, or vice versa? In other words, how good was he if so many artists could imitate him well enough to fool the experts? Finally, how good were these connoisseurs and art experts if they couldn't tell the difference—not just now and then, but in *hundreds* of cases?

These are weighty questions and I am no cynic, so I can only give the hint of an answer. Rembrandt's reputation remains that of a *peintre maudit*, and he became one of the chief avatars of this myth: the creative genius defying society and destiny, flying in the face of all conventions, aesthetic, ethic, and social. Rembrandt the great heretic, the uncompromising rebel, the breaker of rules, misunderstood and unjustly rejected by Society.

This myth came in handy as more and more documents concerning Rembrandt's life were being exhumed from the archives in the course of the 19th century, revealing that his had not been the life of a saint or martyr at all. This very incongruity had been one of Lautner's main objections to Rembrandt's authorship of his best work, in keeping with what he called the "psycho-ethical" principle introduced by Eduard Kolloff in his milestone Rembrandt biography of 1854. One side-effect of his critique was to force the art-historical establishment to make a virtue of their hero's vices; glorifying the inner, human values expressed by the works and dismissing the testimony of the documents as mere external evidence devoid of cultural relevance. Even W. L. Strauss, writing in the preface to his revised

edition of The Rembrandt Documents nearly a century later (1979), concluded:

"If we had to choose a single feature, common to every one of these aspects of Rembrandt's life that emerges from his works and documents, it would probably be his stance vis-à-vis convention. He was opposed to convention in art, and opposed to it in daily life, but most of all, this opposition manifests itself in his conflict with the establishment."

That may well be, but let's face it: when Rembrandt turned his back to the conventions of the past, he went on to establish the conventions of the future.

However innovative and intimately related to his personal experience his aesthetics may have been, they could be and were adopted by other painters—scores of them—while his presumed ethics, or lack of them, became the standard by which the sincerity and genuineness of future artistic rebels could be gauged.

