

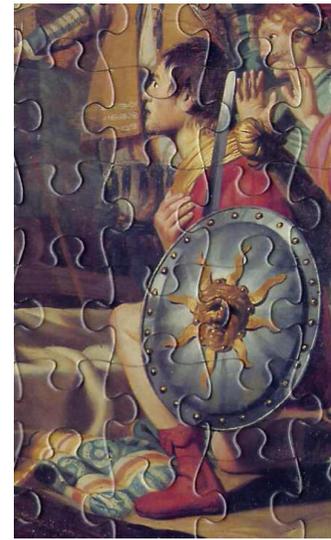
WORD PLAY

Consider the word "weapon," in Dutch and in German "*waffe*," or "*Waffe*," and in French "*arme*." In just a few of etymological steps we come to a medieval cognate of the Dutch "*wapen*," or "*wapenschild*," which means coat-of-arms; in German "*Wappen*," in French "*armes*" or "*armoiries*." The word "*Schild*," i.e. shield, is directly related to the Dutch words for painter ("*schilder*") and painting ("*schilderen*," "*schilderkunst*"). By extension, the word "schild" also means a plaque or sign.



By the 17th century, Dutch painters had come a long way from the days when their livelihood depended upon painting coats-of-arms and shop signs, but, far from denying their origins, they enhanced them by adopting the fully-armed Minerva as patron-goddess of the Arts, Pictura. This was the Protestant alternative to the traditional Catholic patron, St. Luke, symbolized by an ox. Equipped with palette, mahlstick, brushes and a panel with a perspective view, as she is depicted on the frontispiece to Philip Angel's Praise of Painting (Lof der Schilder-Konst, Leiden, 1642), she cut the right martial and humanistic figure for up-to-date painters and clients to identify with.

When Rembrandt depicted himself in various soldierly guises in his self-fantasies between 1629-34, he may well have been providing the necessary exemplars of manly valor at a time when war was rampant, thus re-asserting the painter's power and commitment to providing heroic imagery and inspiration. He may also have been indirectly excusing himself from direct participation in military exercises or warfare, then considered the virile thing to do. Weapons and body armor are often to be seen among the paraphernalia depicted in artists' studios in the 17th century, where they served both as emblems and accessories.



It is therefore not surprising that Rembrandt depicted shields with such loving attention in one of his earliest paintings, generically called History painting because its subject is still a matter of conjecture (Br. 460, 1626; here shown in the fitting puzzle version); let's call it Palamedes for the sake of brevity. Yet the still-life of burnished armor in the foreground of this picture remains fairly unique in Rembrandt's work, and the prominent display of shields soon disappears altogether, with one exception: the 1634 Bellona allegory (Br. 467). In the meantime, he seems to have passed this taste for flashy still lifes—and perhaps the props—on to his star student in Leiden, Gerrit Dou.

A clue to the meaning of this occultation of the shield may be found on the two most notable specimens: both Palamedes' and Bellona's shields have a grotesque human head as central device, which is known as a boss, or *omphalos*, i.e. navel. The first is surrounded by a pattern of eight radiating flames, while the second is crowned by the snakes of the Gorgons. These are two versions of an emblem of Painting, which is like a mirror that transfixes and transforms. (This reminds me of Vasari's anecdote about the terrifying shield made by the mischievous young Leonardo da Vinci to demonstrate his artistic ability). If Rembrandt could do without mirroring shields, it was perhaps because his painting itself had become one.



foto: jmc