

## SAINT PAUL AND SWORD PLAY

In 1661, one year after Rembrandt had finally stepped out of the mirror and taken a good look at the old man that he had become and the painter that he had always been (Self-portrait, Br. 53, Louvre), he indulged in a no-less revealing transformation by depicting himself as the Apostle Paul (Br. 59, Rijksmuseum; right) with identifying attributes, a scroll and a sword (discreetly tucked under his right arm). Since this is the only known instance of his adopting the guise of a historical figure, we can take it as a measure of Paul's significance for him. That Rembrandt identified with the Apostle, a key figure in Protestant Reformation theology, has been convincingly argued by H. Perry Chapman in her book Rembrandt's Self-portraits (1991), from which I quote: "Faith and devotion are Paul's central message; yet they are nothing, he tells us, without humility and self-awareness."

Paul's dramatic conversion from rabid persecutor to enlightened champion of the Christian Faith were a stirring and convincing example of the transformative power of the Grace of God which, according to Calvinist creed, could be acquired independently of deeds and merit. After Jesus himself, Paul's is the most personal voice in the New Testament, speaking as it does in the form of letters addressed to other early Christians and congregations. Although writing expressly in the *name* of Jesus Christ, no other Christian author in the Bible wrote so directly in the first person singular.

Another aspect of Paul's story that may have endeared him to Rembrandt's imagination is that, after having seen the Light, he became blind for three days, and finally changed names, from the Hebrew Saul, to the Latin Paul. This name change is mentioned without any explanation in the Acts of the Apostles, a text that otherwise pays close attention to the attribution and significance of names. The passage with Paul's change of name is a good example (Acts 13:6-12):

*"And when they had gone through the isle unto Paphos, they found a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew, whose name was Barjesus: Which was with the deputy of the country, Sergius Paulus, a prudent man; who called for Barnabas and Saul, and desired to hear the word of God. But Elymas the sorcerer (for so is his name by interpretation) withstood them, seeking to turn away the deputy from the faith. Then Saul (who also is called Paul) filled with the Holy Ghost, set his eyes on him..."*

... and proceeded to deprive the sorcerer of his eyesight for the rest of the season. With this replay of his own blindness in a minor key, and through the magic of parentheses, the Roman-born Saul of Tarsus was rechristened Paul (which means "small").

Last, but not least, Rembrandt gave the name "Titus" to his only surviving son by Saskia. According to historians, this name came from Saskia's sister, Titia, a feminine form of Titus. The New Testament Titus, it will be remembered, was a disciple of Paul, who in one of his letters addressed him—conventionally, it is true—as "mine own son after the common faith."

It is interesting to note that episodes from the Acts of the Apostles provided the subjects for two of Rembrandt's earliest history paintings: The stoning of St. Stephen (1625, Br. 531A, Lyons) and The baptism of the eunuch (1626, not in Bredius, Utrecht). St. Stephen is Rembrandt's first recognized work, and some people have no problem seeing Rembrandt's likeness among the participants in the stoning of the first Christian martyr in the presence of a man still named Saul.



Other paintings from the same period, 1626-27, featured an accessory that provided a direct link between Paul and the artist, and that was to have a less sublimated destiny in his works than the shield (see entry 63); namely the sword. The written word (usually a book) and the sword were Paul's traditional attributes in art; the book because of his writings, and the sword as a double-edged reminder of his militancy and the instrument of his martyrdom. The etymology of Rembrandt's name, as I have noted elsewhere, alludes to the wise use of this weapon (see entry 39).



In Rembrandt's earliest history compositions, the controversial Leiden History subject (1626, Br. 460, see entry 63), David presenting Saul with the head of Goliath (1627, Br. 488, Basle, see fig. entry 39) and Balaam's ass admonishing its master (1626, Br. 487, Paris, above), the sword is a prominent, but as yet generic accessory. It will come into its own soon enough, though, in 1627, with the more precisely rendered broadsword that accompanies St. Paul in prison (Br. 601, 1627, Stuttgart, left). From then on, the swords in Rembrandt's works are always a specific kind of sword—saber, scimitar, kris, rapier, etc.—, readily identifiable by those more knowledgeable in historical weaponry than myself. Rembrandt seems to have represented himself with a sword only twice in his paintings (the Dresden Self-portrait with Saskia from the late

1630s, and the 1661 Self-portrait as the Apostle Paul and twice in his etchings (B. 18 and B. 23, both of which were done in 1634).

Rembrandt certainly gave this weapon its due in his work, and most interestingly in two of his major commissions: the 1642 Company of Frans Banning Cock—in the background of which a man's eye (all that can be seen of him) seems to looking at an upheld sword blade—and The Conspiracy of Claudius Civilis (ca. 1661-62, Stockholm)—in which four swords (including one that is not attached to any figure) converge to touch the sword held by the one-eyed Claudius Civilis. Many people like to think that the one-eyed man in the background of the Nightwatch is Rembrandt: I would say that a painted eye is an eye only in the eye of the beholder.



It is interesting that swords and eyes are brought in such close proximity in both cases, the one prolonging the other by way of the arm and hand, underscoring the deed, the doing of action, like pointing or painting (see entry 28). The sword can blind temporarily—by reflecting light—or permanently. The brush can blind us to the fact that we are looking at paint.