

SHORT ANSWER TO A TALL QUESTION

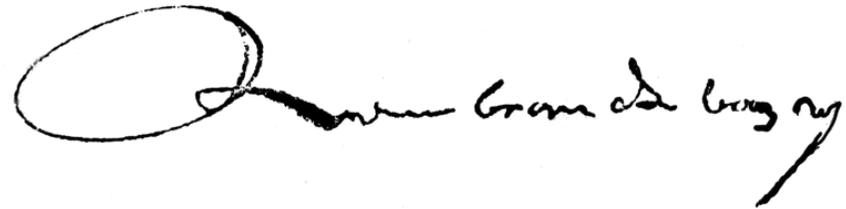
It is amazing how few questions have been put to Rembrandt's name and signatures, apart from the question of their authenticity, as if historical knowledge consisted only of right and wrong answers, and not of a vast complex of cultural facts and artefacts that have as much meaning as we care to give them.

Meanwhile the world is full of answers to unasked questions, and just as full of questions, the asking of which would be unnecessary if we were in a position to understand the answers. And so I was somewhat surprised when I came across this searching query in Walter L. Strauss' preface to the 1979 edition of The Rembrandt Documents:

"If we try to comprehend Rembrandt by seeking a symbol to denote his art or a metaphor to explain his Weltanschauung, we are baffled. The hundreds of books and essays about Rembrandt the artist and Rembrandt the man have already analyzed every facet of his existence, and have yet fallen short of arriving at a concise characterization of the essence of the master's art that would reduce it to a simple formula."

The fact that Mr. Strauss even wondered about such a formula is also something to wonder about. After all, the guiding thread of his work was the name Rembrandt in its myriad forms, and I assume that he had more occasions than anyone to contemplate the most elaborate and trustworthy specimens of his signatures in pen and ink on paper.

The answer could be as short and simple as the name "Rembrandt," but, as we have seen, it is even more concisely formulated in the shape that he gave to his "R" (see entry 44).



(If letters could speak: Rembrandt's signature on a document in which his repayment of a debt in 1665 is finally acknowledged by his creditor)