



Rembrandt's Self-portrait with circles (Br. 52) at Kenwood House in London is dated in the mid-1660s, that is in the last decade, if not years of his life. It is his most "abstract," his most enigmatic and perhaps his most revealing painting. For one thing, it is the second known self-portrait to show him as a painter with the tools of his craft (see next page). This, after decades of adopting disguises of all kinds, appropriating the means of art to materialize his fantasies, or simply playing variations on an existential theme to display his skills as an in-depth portraitist—we simply don't know for sure. For another thing he depicted himself in three-quarters view against an exceptionally light background, as he had done only in his earliest self-portraits in Leiden. Then there is the matter of the circles.

These circles have given rise to many symbolic interpretations—Kabbalistic signs, Giotto's "O," hemispheres of a map of the world, emblems of Theory and Practice, etc.—none of which are provable and all of which neglect the fact that the circles are incongruent and fragmentary (one of them is an ellipse). If you were to ask me, I would immediately think of the circularity of Rembrandt's "R." And I don't think I would be going too far afield, because I would be respecting the circle as a graphic form rather than as the depiction of some more or less symbolic object that would require further interpretation. But I am also reminded of certain works from the late Leiden period with semi-circular elements at the edge of the composition, as well as Br. 430 (left) and especially in the Philosopher in meditation (Br. 431, see entries 11 and 36), in which Rembrandt integrated circular forms to perfection. But in the Kenwood Self-portrait they are simply geometric forms, which means purely compositional devices, like the tentative pen strokes in a sketch that delineate an architectural or an interior space.

That was the first level of abstraction. The second comes in the rendering of the bust draped in a dark coat with only the slightest indications of form and material. The artist's left hand seems to be hidden



in a pocket, while his right hand is completely fused with his palette, brushes and mahlstick, and just as invisible. This is very strange in the self-portrait of a painter finally depicting himself as a craftsman instead of in the more flattering guise of a gentleman virtuoso in the manner of Rubens. X-rays reveal an earlier version of the composition in which Rembrandt showed himself in the act of painting with his right hand, while holding his tools in the left. Indeed we can see a hint of the edge of a canvas precisely at the upper half of the right edge of the painting. This extreme placing creates a tension between the flatness of the pictorial plane and the illusion of a three-dimensional canvas edge: it makes us think that we are seeing what is being painted as it is being painted.

There is a famous Self-portrait drawing (Ben. 432, right) in which the drawing hand is also not visible. Most of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century self-portraits of Dutch painters as painters show them busy working on a picture, as Rembrandt's pupil Gerrit Dou represented himself on several occasions. Yet a more appropriate comparison in terms of pictorial intelligence and complexity would be with Velazquez's Las Meninas and, much, much later, Picasso's paradoxes of simultaneity. We do not have the impression here of seeing a painter looking into a mirror and painting what he sees, as in the Louvre's Self-portrait at the easel from 1660 (left, Br. 53). Instead, we see Rembrandt appearing to himself directly on canvas.

This impression is reinforced by the stepwise spatial progression from the flat background with the circles, to the scarcely modelled bust, and then the head, which is the only part that contains any detail or effects of light and shadow for depth. It is a clear progression from *line* to *plane* to *volume*—up to and including the impasto. The sketchy handling of the rest almost makes us forget that the head is also painted in very broad brushstrokes. The shape of the bust forms a rough semicircle, while the design of the coat repeats the bipartite, or rather tripartite geometrical arrangement of the background, which also seems to be made of cloth or canvas (thought to be a partition in his studio). In any case the result is still a flat canvas with paint on it: that is, *geometry and paint*. Thus in a circular way Rembrandt has represented the seemingly



impossible: not just a self-portrait of the artist as an artist, but a self-portrait of himself *in the act* of painting and discovering himself as a materialized illusion.

This circle is a two-way street: the slight asymmetry of the circles is repeated in that of the eyes. In the same way that we can shift from a simple 2-D form to the optical illusion of a third dimension and back (as in M.C. Escher), we see Rembrandt appearing and disappearing in paint.

I am tempted to say that this self-portrait is unfinished, but I realize that it can never be finished, except by the beholder, who once was Rembrandt himself. The circles, too, are fragmentary, but we consider them whole.

The work by Rembrandt that comes the closest in spirit to this self-portrait is his etching of an Artist drawing from the model (B. 192, ca. 1639), which is the only etching that presents a similar span between the finished and unfinished parts. The subject of this etching is thought to be one of the central temptations or fantasies of the artist. It is Rembrandt's version of the myth of Pygmalion, the sculptor who fell in love with one of his own works and had it brought to life by Venus. Rembrandt does not show a Pygmalion hugging his statue, but an artist tensely facing his model, then cuts the process short, leaving the work unfinished, but its workings visible. We are left suddenly behind the scenes, at the back of the mind, where male desire spins its dreams of fulfilment. From being in love with one's work to falling in love with a live model was a plausible slip to make, especially for a man like Rembrandt: art makes it possible. The artist is surely more to be envied than the anatomist. But what about when the model happens to be oneself?

Speaking of Picasso and full circles, I like to think that when he painted himself and his portrait of Gertrude Stein in the autumn of 1906, the year of the great Rembrandt tricentennial, he had Rembrandt's late self-portraits in mind, taking a good look behind before adventuring into the unknown.

