On Friday, 27 October 1797 the National Council of the Batavian Republic (1795–1801), the successor to the Republic of the Seven United Provinces (1581–1795), voted to accept a present offered to it by the Brabant printmaker Lambertus Antonius Claessens (1763–1834). “The first proof of a labor of three years, being an engraving depicting The Night Watch, undertaken in order to make the masterpiece of Rembrandt, that outstanding painter of the fatherland, better and better known to the Batavian people and other art-loving nations” (figs. 1–2). The Council accepted the gift and ordered the maintenance committee to find an appropriate place to hang the work.

This event had multiple meanings for Rembrandt’s posterity. Until now his civic guard portrait of the company of Frans Banning Cocq had been one of the six paintings commissioned in the late 1630s for the new hall of the Kloveniers (the musketeers and pikesmen), which since 1581 had hung together in the town hall on Dam Square. Now it was singled out on its own as an immortal masterpiece, with the nickname by which it was here called for the first time, The Night Watch. Rembrandt was hereby raised visibly above the level of colleagues like Bartholomeus van der Helst and Govaert Flinck, who had held pace with or surpassed him – especially Van der Helst – for 150 years. At the same time, the Batavian Republic was accepting and acknowledging Claessens’s compliment to the artist as a potent if undervalued representative of Dutch artistic culture in the world at large.

The apotheosis had been in the making for thirty years in select circles since the publication in 1767 of a markedly laudatory judgment of The Night Watch by a famous genius of medical science, Petrus Camper (1723–1789). In a spectatorial journal called De Philosooph, Camper reversed the conventional classicist disparagement of Rembrandt as vulgar and tasteless.
ended up on the Amsterdam Cheese Market, a corner of the folksy Butter Market. In 1876 he was moved to the center of the Butter Market, which was renamed Rembrandt Square (fig. 4). King William III inaugurated the statue in 1852 in the name of the fatherland, the public was treated to fireworks and fun, and the attendant hype was commercialized the way it always is. As a schoolmaster rhymed derisively, there were Rembrandt rolls, Rembrandt cookies, Rembrandt cakes, Rembrandt kewpies, Made from sugar, plaster or wood, But also from silver, steel or gold, Rembrandt brooches, Rembrandt pins. Rembrandt the national hero, who belongs to the king, the people and the souvenir sellers, was born and has never perished since. One way of understanding this may sound like a putdown of the great man, but on reflection it hopefully makes sense as an explanation. That is, that Rembrandt enjoys a phenomenal measure of hype. Hype sounds like an insulting attribute, but is it really? One could also define it as a measure of attention claimed and received in relation to achievement or innate value. It only becomes pejorative when we feel that the ratio between attention and achievement is out of balance. Hype is present in nascent form everywhere, like yeast in the atmosphere. Rembrandt's reputation has in the main been well served by the workings of hyperadulation. An event as innocuous and technical as the transportation of the Night Watch back to its location after the rebuilding of the Rijksmuseum from 2003 to 2013 drew journalists and photographers from around the world, impressed by the lengths to which the museum and the nation went in their veneration of Dutch Icon Number One (fig. 5). Once more, Rembrandt was featured on prime-time news and international front pages.
Highlights like these, especially if they are being tweaked even just a bit, are susceptible to biting criticism. The two go together. A classic instance of critique – not of Rembrandt but of his all too fervent admirers and sanctimonious exploiters – took place in 1906, when elaborate anniversary celebrations were held for the artist’s 300th birthday. The socialist weekly De Kroniek published withering attacks on the committee, under H. P. G. Quack, of “croaking [kwakende, a play on Quack’s name] frogs whose overblown conceit and empty lives you yourselves now reveal to us for the first time.” This was no time “to honour Rembrandt or any other great artists, because we have long lost a true understanding of his essence and greatness, while his name serves merely the chauvinistic self-acclaim of a people that for seven-eighths could not care less about him.” The artist Albert Hahn and the publicist Henri Gree brought out a booklet of 42 pages with sixteen drawings by the one and sixteen poems by the other, satiric images of a Rembrandt come to fill their pockets. The first drawing shows a majestic Rembrandt towering silently above dwarfish dancers, of whom the poem says that they understand Rembrandt only once every three hundred years (fig. 6).

The carnivalesque Rembrandt craze, with its Rembrandt speech, Rembrandt bicycle, Rembrandt lanterns, Rembrandt cigars, Rembrandt cap on Rembrandt hair locks, etc. etc. end in a Rembrandt hangover.

This did not keep an American cigar company, in 1911, from launching the brand Dutch Masters, with Rembrandt’s Syndics of the Drapers Guild on the box (fig. 7). This piece of commercial exploitation led in turn, after half a century during which, thanks to the cigars, the Syndics was copied and caricatured at least as much as the Night Watch, to the artistic appropriation of the motif by the American artist Larry Rivers, which brought it into museums of modern art (fig. 8).

In the twin helix of glorification and depreciation, a special role was reserved for scholars and archivists. When the search was launched for a Dutch Rubens, Rembrandt was the first candidate, but this presented the activists – respectable burghers in prestigious committees – with a reputation problem. The statue was being erected for the honour of the country, and Rembrandt’s honour was not his strongest point. No writer on the artist, from his time on, had praised his character, and in the nineteenth century he was subjected to new extremes of denigration. He was vulgar and money-grabbing to the point of sheer dishonesty, known to many Europeans mainly as the artist who pretended to be dead so his “widow” could raise the prices for his work.1 How could the Netherlands, whose inhabitants were often disparaged as sharp dealers, present a man like him as their greatest artistic hero?

The town archivist of Amsterdam, Pieter Scheltema (1812–1885), felt called upon to correct the insultingly negative image of the artist, which he felt was based on “jealousy and art envy” – kunstnijd, a nineteenth-century word that has disappeared so completely from the language that it does not even occur in the Dictionary of the Dutch Language, the largest dictionary ever published.4 Scheltema was particularly offended by an article in the February 1851 issue of The Art-Journal, published in London.
Indeed, that article, despite being No. t in a series on The Great Masters of Art, is pretty bad. A description of Rembrandt’s appearance in his self-portraits closes thus:

If Rembrandt’s national reputation was linked to Dutch-Belgian tensions of the 1870s, his universal meaning was established largely in response to European politics of 1848. It was at the social and intellectual center of revolt, in the France of 1848, that this discourse played itself out most resonantly. So much so that in 2003 the Canadian-American art historian Alison McQueen could write an excellent book properly titled The Rise of the Cult of Rembrandt: Reinventing an Old Master in Nineteenth-Century France. Just as in the Netherlands, where desired traits were projected onto the artist, in France too ideal characteristics were attributed to Rembrandt. The only difference was that the qualities were the exact opposite of each other: respectability and national pride in the Netherlands, disdain for social convention and universality in France. McQueen: “Connections made between Rembrandt and new ideas in French art and politics led him to be referred to as ‘the most modern of all the [old] masters’, and an artist whose inventions were believed to speak best to the modern soul ‘today’.” The first generation of Rembrandt lovers was born Drastic action was called for. On the eve of the inauguration of the statue, 26 May 1852, Scheltema went a bit too far, insisting on a spelling of the name “Stadh”, says a modern French writer, “was Rembrandt, himself the model of those whom he delighted to portray, they had expression without nobleness – intellect, but not dignity…” It is marvelous how a mind so constituted could ever entertain the idea of painting such a subject as “The Descent from the Cross”, one, in all respects, so foreign to his ordinary course of thought…

That political activists adopted Rembrandt for their own purposes did no harm to his fame, but it was an intermittent phenomenon. Far more constant, though not consistent, was the attention he drew from collectors and artists. The art for which he was praised first in print, in 1641, and thereafter ceaselessly, was etching. Acid-based intaglio printing was fairly uncommon before Rembrandt. With his 300-odd plates he was one of the first artists to exploit it for the full the possibilities of the medium and to build a major oeuvre of etchings. His achievements were engaged with approbation after World War II, as in the introduction to a Rembrandt exhibition in Los Angeles in 1946.9 There is no way to put a fine point to it. The meanings of Rembrandt in Western culture are limitless and up for grabs by all. No single approach can be free of a certain arbitrariness. Once having accepted this, we are better able to examine the fields in which Rembrandt shines the brightest and says the most, without pretending to arrive at a truth that excludes other interpretations.
The poses and lighting effects in early photo portraiture were so evocative of Rembrandt that the works of photographers like Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–1879) were immediately called “Rembrandtesque”. She herself made this explicit in works like her portrait of 1865 of the dramatist Sir Henry Taylor (1800–1886), which she called *A Study in the Manner of Rembrandt* (fig. 12).

The association is so powerful that strong light from one side has the technical name “Rembrandt lighting”. Film as well as photography was a godsend for Rembrandt. And vice versa, as even Sam Goldwyn found out.

In France the same fascination manifested itself. Edgar Degas set the example in 1857, when he made an etched copy after Rembrandt’s *Portrait of a Young Man in a Velvet Cap*, followed by other etchings and portrait paintings, including self-portraits, throughout life. The idea that Rembrandt was more modern than other Old Masters, that he spoke to the sensibilities of the most daring artists of a new day, extended beyond subject matter and style. Degas is quoted to have exclaimed “If Rembrandt had encountered lithography, God knows what he would have done with it.”

Lithography was not the most telling new technique to make artists think of Rembrandt. That was the Arts Club, accompanied by a catalogue of considerable scholarly importance, which was translated into French in 1880 and formed the basis for a complete catalogue of Rembrandt’s etchings, in chronological order, in 1895. “Haden’s interest in Rembrandt is reflected in his own works”, as in the rapid execution and the use of drypoint. “An example is *The Little Boat House*, begun about 1877, which recollects Rembrandt’s views of cottages in the trees, especially his *Landscape with Trees, Farm Buildings and a Tower*, dated 1652.” (figs. 10–11.)

One example that can stand for many is Francis Seymour Haden (1818–1910), the first president of the Society of Painter-Etchers in London, founded in 1880 “to counter the Royal Academy’s then refusal to recognize printmaking as a creative rather than a merely reproductive art.” “Rembrandt – in particular Rembrandt the etcher” – wrote Rhea Blok in a recent study on the subject, “was of major importance in the life of Haden.” In 1877 Haden organized a pioneering exhibition of Rembrandt’s etchings at the Burlington Fine Arts Club, accompanied by a catalogue of considerable scholarly importance, which was translated into French in 1880 and formed the basis for a complete catalogue of Rembrandt’s etchings, in chronological order, in 1895. “Haden’s interest in Rembrandt is reflected in his own works”, as in the rapid execution and the use of drypoint. “An example is *The Little Boat House*, begun about 1877, which recollects Rembrandt’s views of cottages in the trees, especially his *Landscape with Trees, Farm Buildings and a Tower*, dated 1652.” (figs. 10–11.)
Wilhelm von Bode, Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, Abraham Bredius and Wilhelm Valentiner and in Associations like these contributed to the immediacy Rembrandt. When they had serious disagreements, it brought out catalogues raisonnés of the paintings of Rembrandt’s appeal, rejuvenating his contemporaneity in very different circles. For the judgment of paintings, which have a broader appeal than etchings if less than cinema, art-historical research has also been stimulated by Rembrandt studies. The exercise of critical connoisseurship received a big boost during the last quarter of the nineteenth century by the proliferation of Rembrandt paintings on the market. Were they authentic? Making use of photographs and the spread of printed books, historical documentation and iconography was ignored when it came to the attribution. Laboratory findings were consulted where they existed, but they were subordinated to the judgments of the connoisseur specialist. The appearance of vol. 1 was nonetheless greeted erroneously as a triumph of science over intuition and its de-attributions were mainly accepted. In vol. 2 (1986; 1986–1984) the sample to be covered was reduced to the 420 paintings in Horst Gerson’s revised edition of Bredius (1969), thereby removing comparative data that could have clarified the attributions.

The mood of these three volumes was upbeat, the approach positivist, and the claims far going. The starting principle was that any and all signs of authenticity must be present in the painting itself and that close, systematic observation could interpret those signs. Evidence from provenance research, historical documentation and iconography was ignored when it came to the attribution. Laboratory findings were consulted where they existed, but they were subordinated to the judgments of the connoisseur specialist. The appearance of vol. 1 was nonetheless greeted erroneously as a triumph of science over intuition and its de-attributions were mainly accepted. In vol. 2 and 3 (1985–1986) the division of the paintings into A, B and C grades, in long, indigestible entries, met with increased resistance; colleagues began to wonder whether the Project was not being undertaken. The Rembrandt Research Project (RRP) was conceived in 1956, funded and founded in 1968 and still, in 2014, not yet complete. One can best understand the project by distinguishing between four phases, each with a distinct identity. Between 1981 and 1989 the project brought out three volumes of A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings. The initial aim was to review the attribution of all 610 paintings accepted in 1955 by Abraham Bredius. This was carried out in vol. 1 for the paintings from 1625 to 1651. The task proved however to be so laborious that in vol. 2 (1986; 1986–1984) the sample to be covered was reduced to the 420 paintings in Horst Gerson’s revised edition of Bredius (1969), thereby removing comparative data that could have clarified the attributions.

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wished to say to the enemy: you Germans are guardians of one of the greatest paintings in the history of art, a painting of an aging man who is a warrior but who is nonetheless humane and sensitive; at war with each other though we are, we expect you to live up to the standards set by Rembrandt. *The Man in the Golden Helmet* could fill this role because of its consummate Rembrandtness and because it enjoyed exalted status in Berlin as the first painting to be bought, in 1890, by the newly founded Society of Friends of the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum, upon the recommendation of Wilhelm von Bode. The painting was a token of trust between the gods of art and the cultured citizens of Germany. With this image, irresistibly melancholy and heroic, shining in a crepuscular golden glow, Rembrandt was thought capable of overcoming even the ugly sides of Prussian militarism. We may doubt whether the painting could have carried this message if Phaidon and the museum had been aware that *The Man in the Golden Helmet* was not painted by Rembrandt at all, but was the work of an unidentified master in or around Rembrandt’s studio. This was first broached in 1969 not by the RPP, as is usually thought, but by the American art historian Benjamin Rifkin.16 The quality of Rembrandtness, to misquote Portia, is strained. It is strained through historical and artistic circumstances, contingencies and subjectivities of all kinds, and will not bear all too close examination.

And yet, with all proper respect for irony and uncertainty, there is one field of artistic endeavor that is inseparable from Rembrandt, he from it and both from the tradition of Western art. It also happens to be the single most important purpose of art for the thousands of years leading up to age of Rembrandt.

In the centuries preceding the age of Rembrandt, the foremost and most prestigious function of art was to serve as an adjunct to religious authority and the space that justified human existence itself, deployed the visual arts in massive form to bring across their message of salvation. The Reformation did away with the sacrosanct status of altarpieces and holy images, and even forbade the placing of images in churches, but it did not do away with the attraction of religious imagery to the believer. Moreover, the Dutch Reformation did not eliminate the practice of Catholicism in the country, allowing Catholics to maintain churches behind plain house fronts. In 1600, the largest category in Netherlandish painting was still the depiction of biblical themes. While avoiding the kinds of images that might offend Reformist sensibilities — outright worship of the Virgin or the saints was likely to do so — artists produced subjects from the New Testament on a large scale. In the course of the seventeenth century, a process of secularization took hold, as biblical subjects gave way increasingly to landscape and genre and still life. (Portraiture remained stable at about twenty percent of all paintings made.)

Rembrandt demonstrated a certain resistance to this process. Looking at the division of sacred and secular subjects in his work, we see a persistently large share of the sacred. For whom were these paintings, etchings and drawings made? Until about fifty years ago, no distinction was sought between the various known buyers in terms of their religious denominations. For the art historian or art lover interested only in authenticity, style and quality, this would not be an interesting issue. Nor would it be for Christians who appreciated his biblical images for what it said to their own faith. However, it is worthwhile delving into this question more deeply in order to see how meanings come into play and disappear from view.

Two Amsterdam archivists in particular have enriched Rembrandt studies immeasurably with countless findings concerning Rembrandt’s milieu: Isabella van Eeghen (1913–1996), whose heavily Mennonite background raised her consciousness for the many adherents of that faith among Rembrandt’s patrons, collectors and associates; and Bas Dudok van Heel (b. 1938), born Catholic and especially attentive to Catholic and Remonstrant personalities in Rembrandt’s surroundings. Fresh attention was devoted to his religious iconography by the Lutheran pastor turned art historian Christian Tümpel (1957–2009) and his wife Astrid. A remarkably acute study was written by the Reformed theologian Willem Visser ’t Hooft (1900–1981), the first general secretary of the World Council of Churches. Visser ’t Hooft was an ecumenist, and he saw the same tendency in Rembrandt’s religious iconography. This allowed me, in 1984, in what I called a “new biography” of Rembrandt, to integrate the documentary information concerning him and his Christian environment with a recon-
construction of his oeuvre as a painter. (Concerning the early owners of his drawings and etchings there is insufficient information for a responsible analysis.) Among the things that most intrigued me were Rembrandt’s ties to adherents of the Reformed denomination known as Remonstrantism. The church owed its name to a petition or remonstrance that was submitted in 1610 by a group of Dutch theologians who took issue with certain doctrines concerning grace and predestination as these found expression in the Heidelberg Catechism, the founding document of Dutch Calvinism. The Remonstrants held that individual humans were partly responsible for the achievement of their salvation, a possibility that to the Counter-Remonstrants who opposed them was sheer heresy. If God were almighty, where did the space for human autonomy come from? Were the Remonstrants not denying the power of the Lord? What might have been a limited academic difference of opinion turned quickly into a near-civil war. The struggle ended when a church synod in Dordrecht came out for the Counter-Remonstrants and the stadtholder, Prince Maurice of Orange (1567–1625), ordered the execution of the political leader of the Remonstrants, the advocate for the States of Holland, Johan van Oldenbarnevelt (1547–1619). Other leading Remonstrants were incarcerated, driven to their death or exiled. Among them were two of the foremost intellectuals in the country, the preacher Johannes Wtenbogaert (1577–1644) and the jurist Hugo Grotius (1583–1645). The reactions could hit anyone. The assistant headmaster of Rembrandt’s school, Hendrik Zwaerdcoorn (ca. 1594 – after 1655), was a Remonstrant or not, think of Oldenbarnevelt? My own answer is that it is not. The case gains in significance extending his hand out of the frame and meeting our gaze with his own, Johannes Cornelisz. Sylvius (1564–1639), the poet’s life was placed in danger. The auction at which the two large paintings were sold in 1661 was that of the library of the Remonstrant humanist Petrus Scriverius (1576–1660), who on another occasion commissioned another young artist to paint a satirical attack against the Counter-Remonstrants and the Council of Dordt. The constellation of circumstances was so rich and juicy that I plumped for it heavily. A number of colleagues who continue to debate the case are more skeptical. They point out weaknesses in the iconographical interpretation of the Leiden history painting and express doubt that the paintings in the auction were really those two works and that they belonged to Scriverius.57 However, Rembrandt’s relationship to Scriverius and the Remonstrants does not depend on these speculations. In the 1670s he painted and etched portraits of Johannes Wtenbogaert, the etching being provided with a verse by Hugo Grotius, who was still an escaped convict for a long list of serious, even capital offenses. A more personal tie came into being in 1646, when Rembrandt published one of his most remarkable and personal etchings (fig. 16). The sitter for his portrait etching of a preacher extending his hand out of the frame and meeting our gaze with his own, Johannes Cornelisz. Sylvius (1564–1638) can be called Rembrandt’s father-in-law. He was the guardian of Rembrandt’s wife, Saskia van Uylenburgh, and the highly respected Reformed minister of the oldest church in Amsterdam, the Oude Kerk.
The form of the portrait – an oval trompe-l’œil with a beautiful graphic encomium – belongs to a convention that was practiced by other artists but never before or after by Rembrandt. (Rembrandt was one of the great borrowers and lenders in Western artistic tradition.) The closest model is a twenty-year-older portrait of Scriverius engraved by the Haarlem printmaker Jan van de Velde after a small painting by Frans Hals (fig. 17). That was no coincidence. Rembrandt’s portrait of Sylvius bears a two-line verse on Sylvius by Scriverius. The longer verse preceding it was by an even more outspoken Remonstrant, Caspar Barlaeus (1584–1648), who came to Amsterdam from Leiden (to become the founding professor of philosophy and rhetoric at the new Athenaeum) in the same years as Rembrandt. A striking feature of Rembrandt’s portrait print is that the praise is sung of a Reformed preacher by two Remonstrant humanists. Why Rembrandt took this complex step eight years after the death of Sylvius and six after that of Saskia, we can only guess. Intriguingly, it places him in the middle of a prominent artistic-confessional complex.

This story is worth telling as an instance of a meaning in Rembrandt’s life and work that did not become part of his legend or his posterity in literature and scholarship. Nor was he associated with the religious sectarianism of his time. (Filippo Baldinucci [1624–1697] wrote that Rembrandt was a Mennonite, but this did not command general credence. That Rembrandt was sympathetic to the Jews is a widespread opinion, but it was never said in the seventeenth or eighteenth century, and is now seriously doubted.18) Like his colleagues, he accepted commissions from customers of all the churches in town. If there is any denomination for which he displayed greater weakness than to another, it would be Catholicism. His painting of his own son Titus in a Franciscan habit says a lot in this respect (fig. 18).

If the Christian environment in Rembrandt’s Amsterdam was fraught with conflict and controversy, this is nowhere to be seen in the meaning of Rembrandt to Christians in later centuries. On the contrary, he is the foremost artistic interpreter of the early modern period of the Christian message. This is plain in the opportunity he has offered, and which has gratefully been accepted, to illustrate Bible editions with his paintings, etchings and drawings. The mother of all Rembrandt Bibles was the two-volume monster brought out in 1906 on the commemorative occasion discussed above (fig. 19). Eight years after the first Rembrandt exhibition, in honour of the inauguration of Queen Wilhelmina, this majestic set was dedicated to her mother and regentess Queen Emma. Half a meter high and weighing in at twenty kilos, the unmanageable books were meant only to impress. But impress they did.

Coming up towards the end of the nineteenth century, the prevailing image of Rembrandt was that invented in France: he was seen above all as a stylistic realist, an artistic radical and a political revolutionary. When the Dutch Rembrandt events of the turn of the century had taken place, he was also seen to be boosting Dutch nationalism, genuflecting to royalty and conveying Christian piety and bourgeois respectability. While Rembrandt remains available for all these roles, the one for which he is most often enlisted is that of the interpreter of Christian values, an artist of choice for illustrations of the Bible or religious themes. How much of that persona was deliberately shaped by the artist? After all, Rembrandt must have been doing something to allow for this phenomenal...
arts, which to one author of Rembrandt’s time was “more rhetorical than rhetoric itself”\(^1\). In its most profound use, rhetoric provided a means to connect the event being depicted in a work of art, the intention of the artist and the experience of the spectator. This is what Rembrandt was after, and what he achieved time after time in his best work.

If it is an overstatement to say that Rembrandt achieved in art what Saint Paul did in religion, it is only because art, thankfully, is no longer subject to authoritarian rule, as are churches. However, Rembrandt himself made the comparison, when in 1661 he painted a portrait of Saint Paul (fig. 21). The frame of reference in which these somewhat obscure remarks have their place is the science and art of rhetoric. The theory and applied discipline of this ancient practice of oratory, eloquence and persuasiveness was indispensable not only for professional speakers and writers; it was a prominent element in the curriculum of every trainee or schoolchild throughout antiquity, the middle ages and the early modern era. It was also applied to the visual arts, which to one author of Rembrandt’s time was “more rhetorical than rhetoric itself.”^2\(^\) In its most profound use, rhetoric provided a means to connect the event being depicted in a work of art, the intention of the artist and the experience of the spectator. This is what Rembrandt was after, and what he achieved time after time in his best work.

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