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Face-to-Face With an Indomitable Spirit

Though painted in the teeth of adversity, Rembrandt's 1658 'Self-Portrait' conveys a stately calm.

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'Self-Portrait' (1658), by Rembrandt PHOTO: THE FRICK COLLECTION, NEW YORK/MICHAEL BODYCOMB.

As we mark the 350th anniversary of Rembrandt's death in 1669 (he was born on July 15, 1606), it is worthwhile to reflect upon the enduring legacy of this great Dutch master. Rembrandt's impact is both universal and deeply personal, hence each of us will commemorate his life differently. Some may look at the overarching character of his artistic output, while others may focus upon a particular portrait, landscape, or history painting. My preference is to connect with one of his extraordinary self-portraits. Rembrandt was a radical who pushed against established social and artistic parameters, and he often threw artistic convention aside when he portrayed himself. These images vary enormously from one to another: Sometimes he boldly used light and shadow to create dramatic effects, sometimes he applied thick impastos to enhance their physical character, but always he sought to convey some aspect of his inner being.

The finest Rembrandt self-portrait is arguably the magnificent painting in the Frick Collection in New York, where the master, seated in regal splendor, looks directly out at the viewer, his eyes slightly shaded by the broad brim of his black beret. As we return Rembrandt's gaze (for it is impossible not to), we enter into a silent communication with him. What starts as an awareness of Rembrandt's commanding presence slowly evolves into something deeper and more profound, where we become fully imbued with his deep humanity.

We feel intimately connected to Rembrandt for many reasons, some biographical and some because he makes his self-images feel emotionally as well as physically alive. Documents vividly record Rembrandt's successes and failures, his excesses and his limitations. We know much about his family life, in part because he so often depicted his mother; his beloved wife Saskia, who died in 1642; his son Titus; and his dear companion Hendrickje, who cared for him late in life. Mostly, though, we know Rembrandt through the many painted, drawn and etched self-portraits. We watch him age, from a young aspiring artist in Leiden to a towering success in Amsterdam until, late in life, his body, if not his indomitable spirit, began to weaken and fail. Rembrandt does not idealize his appearance in these works, and, over time, we see

his bulbous nose widen and his jowly cheeks grow ever more distended. The one constant is his steady gaze, often heavy and not without sadness.

Despite Rembrandt's enduring fame, the world had largely passed him by when he died at age 63. At his death he was largely alone, having been predeceased by Hendrickje and Titus. After years of success, Rembrandt's dark, roughly brushed portraits and religious, historical and mythological paintings had largely lost favor, not only among younger patrons but also Amsterdam's city fathers, who had become enthralled by more elegant styles of artists like Ferdinand Bol and Bartholomeus van der Helst. Nevertheless, even as many of Rembrandt's contemporaries turned away from him, others realized that his artistic creations reached into the very essence of human life, fusing the physical and spiritual in ways that had never before been—and would never after be—reached.

Rembrandt painted the Frick self-portrait in 1658. The date is significant, for in that very year Rembrandt suffered the humiliation of seeing his possessions and grand house on the Sint-Anthonisbreestraat auctioned because of insolvency. This self-portrait may well have been one of the first works Rembrandt painted after he moved to a small house in the painters' quarter of Amsterdam. One would never guess from this magnificent image that the master's fortunes and prospects were at such a low ebb. Rembrandt looks out at the viewer with a calm, resigned equanimity that is both sympathetic and stately. His pose, while open and welcoming, exudes confidence and inner strength.

The Savonarola chair in which Rembrandt sits and the silver-knobbed carved wooden staff that he holds so lightly between his fingers reinforce this aura of authority, as does his striking wardrobe—a golden tunic with brocade lapels and red sash, and, draped over his shoulders, a fur-trimmed robe. Despite his large black beret, these are not the clothes of a practicing artist or a Dutch burgher. They are fanciful evocations of ancient dress, similar to what Jupiter wears in Rembrandt's "Jupiter and Mercury Visiting Philemon and Baucis" (National Gallery of Art, Washington), which the master also executed in 1658.

Rembrandt does not specifically assume the awe-inspiring persona of Jupiter in the Frick self-portrait, for his seated pose is embracing rather than intimidating, and his deep humanity is evident in his firm, yet caring expression. Nevertheless, associations with Jupiter's godlike authority are purposeful, not accidental. Rembrandt had an enormous sense of his self-worth, and an abiding conviction in the timeless power of his art, a judgment with which we can readily concur as we stand before this magnificent painting 350 years after his death.

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