

[ Background conversations ]

^M00:00:07

>> Great to see this room so full. And it includes people from our community here in Kingston, people from Queen's, and I also need to extend a special welcome to several guests who are here from some of the lending institutions that are participating in this exhibition, including Dr. Sonia Del Re from the National Gallery of Canada, Dr. Kjell Wangensteen from the Indianapolis Museum of Art, and Dr. Lara Yeager-Crasselt from The Leiden Collection in New York. So, they are we have a real special opportunity to continue our conversation about this topic with our guests, not only our speakers, but our also distinguished guests later this afternoon. It was a pleasure to participate in helping Jacquelyn to organize this exhibition and to contribute an essay to the catalogue. And I know that she regrets very much that she can't be here with us today. So, my job is just to interview, interview, sorry, introduce, interview would be interesting, but we're not going to do that, introduce our speakers, beginning with Jonathan Bikker. And Jonathan, since 2001, has held the post of research curator at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. But he is a native of Canada. Specifically, Hamilton, Ontario. And he completed his master's degree here at Queen's, and almost got to the end of his Ph.D. when he left us for Utrecht University where he did receive his Ph.D. with a dissertation on an important follower of Rembrandt, Willem Drost. And that was published as a book in 2005 by Yale University Press. It's still the standard monograph on that artist. He has since then published widely on Dutch art, including on several paintings by Rembrandt. So, now you can see what Jonathan is going to talk to us about. At the Rijksmuseum, he has been responsible for cataloguing and is still working on cataloguing the museum's holdings of 17th century Dutch paintings. And he's co-curated a number of important exhibitions, including late Rembrandt in 2014-15, which was an absolutely once-in-a-lifetime project that brought something like over 400,000 visitors, I think, to the Rijksmuseum.

>> 550,000.

>> 550,000. Astonishing. Astonishing. And his latest publication is called Rembrandt: Biography of a Rebel. I'm pleased to say that we are using it as the textbook for my Age of Rembrandt class this semester. I don't know why I don't see a gaggle of students here waiting to get your autograph. But maybe they're just a little oh, there we are. Yay! Good for you. Thank you so much for being here. Yes. And that book, there are a few copies available here at the reception desk should any of you be interested in reading it for yourself. So, here is Jonathan Bikker.

^M00:03:19

[ Applause ]

^M00:03:28

>> Thank you, Stephanie. As I was already introduced, my name is Jonathan Bikker, and I'm from the Rijksmuseum. This is Rembrandt van Rijn also from the Rijksmuseum. This is a very young early portrait, selfportrait from around 1628. Rembrandt here is about 22 years old.

And this is a very radical and innovative painting. He presents himself with this wild doff of curly hair, and with virtuoso brushwork and scratching in the paint. Of course, the most radical thing about the painting, something that no one had done before, is to, is the lighting in the painting. It comes, instead of coming from the front, it comes from behind, and his face is totally cast in shadow. Rembrandt presents himself here as a creative genius. His contemporaries probably would have known this even better than we do today because they would have interpreted that shadow across his face as a sign of melancholy. Not the kind of melancholy that you and I suffer from from time to time, but the Renaissance variant creative melancholy, which was suffered by artists in particular, as well as poets, philosophers, and even statesmen. They all had an excess of black bile cursing through their bodies. And every once in a while, this would heat up and create something called enthusiasma. And that's what prompted them to create their masterpieces. Rembrandt himself was very aware of the phenomena of creative melancholy. The best example of this, of course, is his painting Aristotle with a Bust of Homer, now in the Metropolitan Museum, that he painted in 1653 for the Sicilian collector Don Antonio Ruffo. This is a meditation on, on melancholy. From the very beginning of Rembrandt's career, he presented himself and thought of himself not as a follower, but as a trendsetter, someone who bucked tradition, thumbed his nose at it. Many of his contemporaries were very wellaware of this, and some of them appreciated it. Others did not appreciate it at all. Most of them, the critics, most of whom wrote, it's true, after his lifetime, after his, after he died in 1669, they accused him of breaking the rules of art. They never actually called him a rebel. One of them, however, did call him the first heretic of art, which is more or less the same thing. It's interesting to note that some of the criticism that Rembrandt received that was directed actually at his late work is equally applicable to his early work. For example, Abraham Brueghel, he was the first person to write a criticism of Rembrandt that has been preserved. And it was a few months after his death. And he wrote in a letter to Don Antonio Ruffo that contemporary Italian painters wouldn't be caught dead painting a trifling, quote, a trifling draped figure in which the light shows only the tip of the nose. He was responding to Ruffo's lament that Ruffo was trying to find Italian painters who would paint pendants to the Aristotle. So, he was actually talking about the Aristotle.

^M00:07:51

But, yeah, that, you know, the lighting, remark about the lighting only on the tip of the nose, that could, of course, also, is also equally applicable to this 1628 self-portrait that's on the screen now. While the detractors would be in the majority after Rembrandt's death, early in the, in his career, the artist had a fervent admirer who appreciated the radically innovative qualities of his work. That admirer was Constantijn Huygens. He was the Secretary of Print for Frederik Henrik, Prince of Orange, and the Stadtholder of the Dutch Republic. Huygens visited Rembrandt around the time that he painted

this self-portrait on the screen at the end of 1628, or beginning of 1629 when the artist was living in Leiden where he was born. And his praise of the fledgling artist knew virtually no bounds. According to Huygens, the greatest artists of Ancient Greece and Renaissance Italy had already been outdone by the beardless Dutch youth.

^M00:09:12

^M00:09:15

There is one painting in particular, painting that must have been on Rembrandt's easel at the time, that Huygens really appreciated. Huygens appreciated, in particular, Rembrandt's ability to depict the passions of the soul, basically what we would call the emotions nowadays. And painting the passions of the soul, that was the main task of the history painter. And a history painter is a painter of biblical or mythological scenes. And in the hierarchy of genres, history painting was the most important. Huygens especially appreciated Rembrandt's depiction of Judas's emotions. In this painting, Judas Repentant, trying to return the 30 pieces of silver that he had received for betraying Christ. According to Rembrandt, or Huygens said about this painting, and about the figure of Judas in this painting, compare this figure with all Italy, indeed, with all the wondrous beauties that have survived from the most ancient of days. One of Rembrandt's early biographers tells us that he went to great lengths to find just the right way to render the emotional states of his figures. Rather than accepting existing formulas for their depiction, he would constantly draw and redraw and draw again these figures. An example are these three red chalk drawings from around 1631 of an old man seated in a chair seemingly listening intently to someone outside of the picture plane someone we don't see. Rembrandt, probably about two years later, Rembrandt chose the figure on the right then for the figure of Jacob listening to his young son Joseph's telling of his dreams. And I think if you look at the story that's told here, that you'll realize that Rembrandt made the right choice in choosing this figure for that, for that scene. Another way that Rembrandt practised the emotions and depicting the emotions was in this, well, it's not really a series, but four etchings of himself pulling faces in front of the mirror. Needless to say, no one had ever done this before, or at least published them in the form of etchings. We see him here in the, and these are very small. The top one where he's looking surprised, that's, there's, that's in the current, in the exhibition here as well. So, you can look at it there.

^M00:12:40

And this one, he's laughing. And I guess he's pretty angry in this one. And I'm not exactly sure what's going on on the far right. These all kind of seem rather superficial emotions, if you ask me. Sometimes Rembrandt can be very profound, and almost try and drag us into the inner depths of a person's thought, such as this painting, which is also, of course, in the exhibition here of the Head of an Old Man in a Cap from around 1630 that belongs to the Bader Collection. We don't know what's going on in this painting. We don't know what

this man is thinking. Because this is a new type of painting that Rembrandt and Jan Lievens helped to develop.

^M00:13:35

It's a so-called tronie. Tronie is the Dutch word for mug or face, basically. But, yeah, Rembrandt doesn't give us any clues. There are no attributes in this painting that would identify this figure. So, what Rembrandt is doing, what this is a case of, is of viewer participation. We have to participate in the scene. We have to imagine what this figure is. He leaves it entirely up to us. And this is one of the most radical things that Rembrandt did. And he did it throughout his career in all kinds of ways. He was always looking to maximize viewer participation. Sometimes he would do that, why, here's another example where he maximizes viewer participation. This is a late work, the so-called Syndics. This is a corporation portrait. So, a group of men sitting around a table. Hundreds of these were made in the Netherlands in the 17th century. This is the one and only painting of this type by Rembrandt, and it revolutionized, revolutionized the genre. Instead of just showing the men sitting around a table posing basically to be portrayed, or interacting a little bit with each other, Rembrandt involves us in this painting. It's as if we've walked into the wrong boardroom and disturbed them, and they're all, you know, what are you doing here? They're all, the figures are reacting to us. Or perhaps we're not, you know, we're sitting in the room and they've passed judgment on something and we're in total disagreement and they're looking at us, you know, how dare you defy our judgment. Whatever the case, Rembrandt is, we, the viewer, are involved in this, in this painting. Another way Rembrandt had of involving us, the viewer, in the painting, was by do I have to hurry up? A reductionary process by leaving things out. This painting on the left, for example, of Andromeda, usually when you showed Andromeda, the story of Andromeda, you did it as Joachim Wtewaël did here on the right. He showed the monster who was about to devour her, or was intending to devour her. And you also showed the hero, Perseus, who was coming to her rescue. Rembrandt leaves the monster and Perseus out. So, we focus on the figure of Andromeda, and we identify all the more with the emotions that she's experiencing now, a mixture of fear and possibly relief as well and anticipation of being rescued by Perseus. My favourite example, of course I'm biased, it's a Rijksmuseum painting, but my first, my personal favourite of this process of leaving things out is the so-called Jewish Bride. That's not actually the subject of this painting. It's actually, it tells the story of Isaac and Rebecca. And because of a famine in their homeland, they were sent by God to the land of Gerar, which was ruled by the Philistines. And Isaac and Rebecca were newlyweds. And so it's a very strange story. When Isaac and Rebecca go to Gerar, the land of the Philistines, Isaac is really worried that if the Philistine men know that he is married to Rebecca, that they will kill him so that they can sleep with his wife. So, he poses as her brother. But one day, they think they're alone, and so they start touching each other, not in a way that brothers and sisters are

supposed to touch each other, but it turns out they're not alone, and Rembrandt made a preparatory sketch of this, for this painting. And there, he included the figure on a balcony of King Abimelech, and Abimelech saw Isaac and Rebecca fondling each other. He leaves that figure out in the painting. And some have said that he was actually, he was painted in the painting, but the painting has been cut down. I don't believe that for a minute. The painting hasn't been cut down, or it has been cut down, but not that dramatically. Rembrandt left out that figure so that we could take on the role of Abimelech as the witnesses of the marital love between Isaac and Rebecca. So, this is a very profound and radical manner of getting us involved in the, in the painting of viewer participation.

^M00:18:44

^M00:18:47

So, Rembrandt wasn't, didn't follow tradition by sticking to the letter and including all of the figures in his, in his, in his compositions that were supposed to be there. Another way that he broke with tradition was by painting subjects that had never been the subjects, subjects of oil paintings before. And a wonderful example just so happens to be in the Rijksmuseum of this is Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem. One of the amazing things about this painting is that it's another prime example of Rembrandt taking us into the inner depths of someone's, the workings of someone's mind. Jeremiah is having a vision here. If you look at the traditional way that visions were depicted in art, for example, this print on the right after Domenico Fetti, yeah, it's very artificial, you know, his vision is being held up in a blanket by angels. Rembrandt incorporates the vision into the composition. We see in the background the destruction of Jerusalem. And the only way we know that this is a vision and not the actual destruction is because of that very abstract landscape around the very detailed figure. It's very abstract, has almost this neon kind of lighting. And so we're literally in Jeremiah's mind, in his head, in this painting. This is one of the prime examples painted in 1630, this is one of the prime examples of Rembrandt's fine style of painting. He had developed this in his early, early career, and finally in 1630, it's a breakthrough year for him in more than one way.

^M00:21:05

And one of the ways is because he accomplished this very, very fine and meticulous style. This style would go on to inspire a whole school of painting that existed well into the 18th century, which was called the Fine Painters School, sometimes the Leiden School of Fine Painters. But anyway, even a remarkable thing about this, it's so, that figure of Jeremiah is so finely and meticulously depicted. But if you look up close at his doublet, you'll see that some of the, some of the ornament on his, the brocade on his doublet that's actually made by scratching into the, into the paint. And we saw that already in that early self-portrait. Sometimes he did this with the butt end of his brush. This is one of the radical, one of the three radical ways Rembrandt had of creating texture in his paintings. One of my

favourite examples, also a painting in the Rijksmuseum, I'm sorry, is the kid, the tail of the kid, held by Anna in Tobit and Anna with the, with the Kid. You'll look, you'll have to look in the exhibition, because there are also examples of this technique here. Rembrandt probably actually stole this technique from Jan Lievens. I don't have an early example of Jan Lievens for this. But at any rate, Rembrandt used this throughout his career. Jan Lievens stopped using it. He only used it in his early career. But Rembrandt experiments with it throughout his career. Here's The Jewish Bride. And in the cape of Isaac, you can see some very, very fine, I think he might have done it with an etching needle actually, very fine zigzag lines or straight vertical lines, but they're very, very fine scratching. A second method that Rembrandt had for creating texture was sculpting with the paint. And he would do this sculpting with paint like the sculptor models clay. And he would replicate the objects in three dimensions with the paint. An early example of this is the Head of an Old Man, where the furrows of the brow are replicated with very thick paint. This is definitely, to my mind, something that he stole, a technique that he stole from Jan Lievens. In this painting, you can't see it in reproductions of course, but if you look at this painting in real life, especially in raking light, you can see that the fringe of this old woman's headscarf is, it looks like a real fringe because the paint is so thick and modelled like, to look like a fringe. It's absolutely amazing. We don't have dated, early dated works by Jan Lievens, but if the, art historical dating of this painting is correct, then, then Lievens was the inventor of this, of this method. Again, it's something that Rembrandt used throughout his career. As you may or may not know, we are doing now extensive research on the, The Night Watch. We've put a glasshouse in front of the painting, an elevator, and we can go up and down on the elevator. I've had the pleasure of doing that a couple of times and made this photograph on the right of the embroidery on the jacket of Lieutenant Willem van Ruytenburch. And the reason I did that, this is in raking light. One of our conservators is holding the lamp for me there. So, I could, I just wanted to let you see how Rembrandt uses that method of sculpting with the, with thick paint to replicate, in this case, the embroidery on the jacket of van Ruytenburch. And Rembrandt goes on to do, using this technique. It has a high point literally, as well as literal high point in the sleeve of Isaac in The Jewish Bride. This is the thickest passage of paint in any 17th century work of art. And you'll have to wait until the 19th century to find paint that is thicker than this. And it appears all the more thicker because the collar of, Isaac's collar is actually the ground, that olive brown, that's actually the ground layer. So, the first layer that was put on a painting. So, you go from 0 to 100 in something like 5, 15 centimetres here. There's one technique that Rembrandt did develop himself, and only in his late career, and that was applying the paint with the palette knife. And The Jewish Bride is another example of that. And you can see it, especially well in the, in the xray. You can see very, very straight line edges of the, of the palette knife

here. Rembrandt got a lot of flak for using these, these, these methods of creating texture. And they were mostly applied to his late work. The funniest ones, the most humorous criticisms came from Arnold Houbraken in the beginning of the 18th century in his artist biographies. He wrote a biography, one of the, one of the biographies was that of Rembrandt. And, yeah, at one point, he says, when the artist's late pictures are viewed up close, it looks like the paint had been smeared on with a bricklayer's trowel. And elsewhere, he, elsewhere, he says, he poked fun at the artist by stating, Rembrandt's, Rembrandt once painted a portrait in which the paint had been applied so thickly that one can lift the picture up from the ground by the nose. And supposedly, Rembrandt would, if he had visitors in his studio, he wouldn't allow them to get up close to the paintings because he would say, oh, no, you know, you're going to pass out from the fumes, don't get up close. And that's because if you go up close to a painting like this, you don't see anything. It's an abstract work of art.

^M00:28:15

You have to view it from a distance. But the point I'm trying to make is that these techniques were thought of as radical at the time, and that they weren't only from the late period, but Rembrandt already started using them in the early period of his work. Sometimes Rembrandt was criticized for things that we think are, nowadays are very tame. One of these things is, for example, is, were his depictions of old people. And if you look at the exhibition, you'll see a hell of a lot of old people. It's very strange that a young man would be so obsessed with old people. But at any rate, critics thought this broke the rules of art because Rembrandt chose to depict a misshapen old wrinkled person rather than a wellformed fresh and youthful one. Whether, yeah, we don't know if Rembrandt was actually trying to be provocative with these depictions of old people. In some works of art, he was being provocative. For example, this etching of a man urinating and etching of a woman urinating. And if you look really good, you can see that she's also defecating. Even nowadays, urinating, and definitely defecating in public, is, is a nono, is not socially acceptable behaviour here. There was a protest in 2017 in Amsterdam because in Amsterdam there are a lot of public urinals for men, of course, but there's nothing for women. And women were getting, women, it's called wild pissing in Dutch. And women were getting fines for urinating in public. And to protest this, they urinated in public. So, it's still shocking today, even in Amsterdam.

^M00:30:25

[ Laughter ]

^M00:30:27

Yeah, so, yeah, those, you know, urinating people, those were, of course, provocative. Was Rembrandt trying to be provocative with his, with his nudes at this time? People thought so. He was, this, he was accused of breaking the rules of art, especially for his nudes that he made at this time, because Rembrandt chose no Greek Venus as his model, but a washerwoman, or treader of peat. And he, instead of

choosing the most beautiful thing nude in nature and improving on that, instead, he depicted flabby breasts and wrenched hands. Yes, even the marks of the corsetlacings on the stomach, and of stockings around the legs. And as I said, yeah, Rembrandt was accused of not hesitating to trample on our rules of art by choosing these ugly nudes. And he was called the foremost heretic in art because of them. He was supposed to do what Italian Renaissance artists did. But instead, he was accused of following nature. I think I have to wrap up. Okay, skip that, and just end with this. Yeah, was Rembrandt just following nature? I don't think so. I think what Rembrandt was doing was he realized that flabby breasts and folds of skin and cellulite was an ideal playing ground for the play of light and shade. Those, those, those ideal nudes of Renaissance art, they didn't present a good canvas for light and shade. So, Rembrandt chose an ugly model to make beautiful art. And maybe even that was his statement with these works. Thank you.

^M00:32:26

[ Applause ]