Notes on the Exhibition *Rembrandt and the Face of Jesus*, Including "Christ Preaching; Bring the Children Unto Me" and the Small Late Portraits of Jesus

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This is a nine-page journey into Rembrandt offered to anyone who's interested, by an amateur, not an art historian. Accompanied by great illustrations! First, look at the dramatic center of Rembrandt's "Christ Preaching" or "100 Guilder" print, 1649. (For a reproduction of the whole print, see later in this essay):

There's a surprise here. On Jesus' robe, near the bottom, note the cast shadow of the man to the right—his profile and praying hands. The light source casting this shadow is out of the picture to the right. What is the function of this shadow in the print, beyond just showing off Rembrandt's facility with shadings?

I raise the question now but suspend it; I will return to it in a moment.

Hands

First let's think briefly about the drama played by *hands* in the print, including in the detail reproduced above. Begin with the very dramatic gestures of Jesus' hands, right above the anonymous man's praying hands and their shadow.

With one upraised hand, his left, Jesus beckons weak and sick children and others to come to him for his blessing and cure. But with the back of his right hand he presses against the chest and shoulder of a distinguished looking man with a beard, probably one of Jesus's disciples, perhaps Peter, who the Bible says "rebuked" the people who came to Jesus in this episode of preaching and healing that Rembrandt's picture probably depicts. (See Matthew 19:13-14 for full details.) Jesus's back-of-the-hand gesture towards the bearded man seems to be Jesus' own "rebuke." It fits with what Matthew tells us, that Jesus ignored his disciples' advice and told the crowd of people to approach him. One who does is to the left, in front of the bearded man: a mother with her back turned to us, holding a child.

Rembrandt's print as a whole is famous for its portraits of a wide variety of humanity and their costumes. See the reproduction of the whole print later in this essay for examples. I'll describe some here. In response to Jesus, some make dramatic gestures of supplication or astonishment with their hands; others appear wary or indifferent. A few ignore the whole event, conversing with others about some business they take to be much more important.

Some wear opulent clothes and stand upright, full of themselves and their temporary health and wealth. Others kneel. Two are lying on wheeled carts that have brought them here, as if they knew ahead of time Christ would appear (how?) and had heard of Jesus' powers to heal the sick. These prone figures are wan and hollow-eyed and appear to be at death's door; even their clothes are thin and seem to be worn like a death shroud. Their poses are also remarkably like Lazarus' when Jesus raises him from the dead with a gesture from his hand, another scene Rembrandt frequently depicted. Except in this case these poor figures seem to be journeying *to* the grave, not returning from it.

Hands of a dying man, hands in prayer, hands of a businessman striking a deal, hands of those who are not sure what is happening or what it means. And then Jesus's hands, breaking rules, commanding, accompanying his preaching with gestures as powerful as his words. It's as if Rembrandt is summing up the whole history of humanity by using just the movement of our hands in a daily moment captured for eternity.

Africa in Judea/Amsterdam

One man to the far right in the crowd in "Christ Preaching," in the shadows along with others, appears to be a man with distinctly African features. Here's a close-up of his profile:

A similarly African face appears in another Rembrandt print, "Christ Before Pilate" (1636). That figure too wears a decorated headband, though not placed so low on his forehead as the one above. Why should Rembrandt include an African in the crowd?

Because Rembrandt's crowd scenes, the Philadelphia exhibit tells us, often included figures drawn from life—from Amsterdam's streets. The narrative may be biblical, but Rembrandt populated his stage set with the faces of his contemporaries.

A cosmopolitan trading center where merchants and others could do business and exiles could begin their lives again, Amsterdam in the seventeenth century during Rembrandt's time was as culturally and racially diverse as any city in Europe.

Rembrandt's Jews

Rembrandt drew many of his figures inspired by people in the Jewish section of Amsterdam where he lived. Amsterdam's Jews were both Sephardic, exiled from Spain and Portugal after the Inquisition, and Ashkenazi, from eastern Europe. Some wore clothes just like others in Amsterdam, while others wore clothing that emphasized their foreignness and difference, marking them as "Eastern" and "oriental." Rembrandt depicts both in his crowd portraits.

The thesis of the Philadelphia exhibit *Rembrandt and the Face of Jesus* is that Rembrandt (followed by some members of his studio) revolutionized the portraiture of Jesus by using a

dark-haired Jewish man or men for a model—not only perhaps the first time in the history of art that a living person had been depicted as Jesus, but also, the exhibit claims, portraying Jesus as dark-haired and Semitic in a way that ran counter to the vast majority of earlier Jesus images in Western art, where he really looks more northern European than Mediterranean, not to mention Jewish.

Rembrandt in his middle and late work emphasized Jesus' Jewish identity in other ways too, most notably by having him break apart of loaf of challah at the climactic moment in the meal with the disciples at Emmaus (cf. Luke 24:13-27), one of the biblical episodes Rembrandt frequently depicted.

It's worth speculating on what might have drawn Rembrandt to this episode of bread-breaking. It's full of irony, for one. Until this moment of the meal, according to the Bible, the Disciples don't recognize that the figure they had invited to dinner is Jesus returned from the dead. It's one of many somewhat comic examples in the Bible of the Disciples' very human frailties and obtuseness. And as soon as the Disciples *do* recognize Jesus he promptly disappears, leaving an empty chair at the table! It's precisely this moment of awe and shock that Rembrandt focuses on in many of his renderings of the Emmaus episode.

I wonder if Rembrandt, aside from enjoying the perverse humor in the story, was also drawn to its fascinating central conundrum: why can't the Disciples recognize a man they've seen many times? What allows us to "recognize" a face, anyway, not to mention divinity or sacredness?

The Emmaus episode perhaps hints that the mind's preconceptions are stronger than the senses. That is, because the Disciples believe Jesus to be dead they can't "see" him living; they see merely a plain, ordinary human.

It's a fascinating challenge for a visual artist: depict the dramatic moment when an audience suddenly becomes aware that its vision has been veiled and its blindness is now suddenly lifted. The greatest Emmaus prints are a tribute to visionary *seeing*. But, paradoxically, the disciples actually *see* Jesus when he's no longer present before their (mortal and fallible) physical eyes. Rembrandt is onto something regarding sight, I think: human eyes may be windows, but it's the human brain and the imagination that really creates what is seen and what is not seen. The Emmaus prints also hint that, when it comes to the sacred, the Disciples and the rest of us can't normally see or appreciate it: we're too blind.

What's the relevance of this to Rembrandt's revolution in the portraiture of how Jesus' features actually might have looked? I think it's here: Rembrandt is suggesting that visual conventions have made us blind to how Jesus the Jew appeared in real life. It's an insight Rembrandt came to only later in his career. But in the dark-haired and contemplative man featured in some of those late Jesus portraits many of Rembrandt's contemporary viewers (as *Rembrandt and the Face of Jesus* tells us) found it hard or impossible to *recognize* and renounce their northern European preconceptions of what Jesus should look like. They couldn't see without prejudice the new (but really old) Jewish Jesus whom Rembrandt had placed before them. Call it the Emmaus paradox.

Even Rembrandt's disciples after his death split on the issue, with many of those he'd trained in his studio returning to the more conventional, northern European representations of Jesus that were common before Rembrandt's revolution in Jesus portraiture.

The Valley of the Shadow

Back to the "100 Guilder" print of "Christ Preaching." It's also famous for its stunning use of contrasting light and shadow, a miracle of technical suavity, proficiency, and invention by Rembrandt the printmaker. Here's the whole print:

If this print depicts Christ's miracles against the darkness of the world, it also enacts that very drama internally, via the print's own dramatic use of chiaroscuro. In a reproduction like the one above you can't really see what you view when you stand in front of the actual print itself: the dark spaces are rich and deep and velvety. They envelope the dramatic human scene with Christ at its center, looming above and around it as if this life of ours is just a fleeting moment of light surrounded by darkness and decay—look at that doorway to the right, for example.

The light-and-dark balance in the picture is also asymmetrical, with Jesus slightly off to the left of the picture's center: the drama that surrounds him has literally pushed him off to one side. The light emanates most strongly from Jesus's head, with spokes of it radiating out like a halo. But the light also strikingly plays off of Jesus's upraised left hand, the one proclaiming his presence there and welcoming all to come forward and be comforted. Of course, the "source" of the picture's light is rather ambiguous or contradictory. It's double: both natural (the sun, shining onto the scene from above and off to the right of the picture space) and supernatural (as signified by the halo, set against the cave-like darkness behind the scene).

Now let's return to those shadowy, praying hands on Jesus's robe near the center of "Christ Preaching." What role do they play in the drama of this scene?

Perhaps this: if Jesus's hands perform God's eternal work, the old man's praying hands may signify the insubstantial and temporary shadow of our time on this earth—all our fears and supplications and hopes. That would certainly fit with the print's predominant visual sense that darkness dominates and light is only brief and passing. And yet of course the light focused on Jesus signifies Eternity, though the eternal significance of this moment is missed by more than a few in the crowd: not only do they not *see* it, they don't understand what's happening either.

The sensibility of Rembrandt's "Christ Preaching" print—especially its use of chiaroscuro—is very like that of the two most famous biblical passages that refer to shadows, 1 Corinthians 13 and the 23rd Psalm. Corinthians tells us that we barely see the Eternal because it can only be imagined as if "through a glass darkly," mostly obscured by the effects and preoccupations of this world. And in the 23rd Psalm's famous phrasing (King James version), this world is "the valley of the shadow of death": walking through this valley equals our life, and human life is always shadowed. The Psalm prays for sustenance and succor on our life's journey, not just in the time of our death.

So all in Rembrandt's crowd live in shadow, even the ones full in light. Even the man praying perhaps has just a shadowy sense of who it is he petitions.

Rending the Veil of Mimesis

There's another possible twist to the meaning of shadows in Rembrandt's print, one related to how, when it came to portraying Christ, Rembrandt challenged the dominant mode of representing Jesus in all of Western painting. I'd say it's a challenge not just to the images of Jesus (and the narratives embedded in those images that give them significance), but also to the concept of mimesis itself, the claim that art's primary reason for existing is to be a "glass" accurately imitating the visual appearances of this world.

The Philadelphia exhibit informs us that the light-haired and light-bearded, narrow-faced, Nordic image of Christ was enshrined in Western art on the authority of "Veronica's Veil," which supposedly contains an image of Christ on the cross miraculously implanted from his sweat to the cloth that the future saint used to wipe Jesus's face.

The cloth itself—framed more elaborately than a painting and preserved under multiple layers of glass in St. Peter's basilica in the Vatican in Rome—has not been viewed closely by outsiders for decades. Reproduced images of it, including those now on the Internet, show only a vague brown silhouette with no discernible details. Copies of the shadowy stain-like image on this Veil, however, circulated infinitely throughout Europe, and many other churches and holy sites offered other cloths that claimed to be authentic, not copies. All drew large crowds to holy sites.

Western paintings of Jesus on the Cross before Rembrandt, the Philadelphia exhibit claims, were supposed to reproduce the basic mimetic "truths" of Veronica's Veil and its varied versions. It's not as if the image were a single, easily reproducible thing. Some of these representations pictured Christ in agony, others in repose, but most all showed him with a light beard parted at the chin. Christ's Nordic features as suggested in the veil were one element that united the many different interpretations in painting of his facial expressions. And as one reproduced image reinforced another the suggestion was that these

kinds of images, together, became for Westerners a miraculously faithful copy of how Jesus actually looked. Painters were expected to reproduce this copy.

I would guess that such a claim in *Rembrandt and the Face of Jesus* is somewhat controversial among art historians, for it is rather broad and absolute when it comes to tracing a single pattern in Western art history. But it's clear that there was *some* sort of consensus by the middle seventeenth century in Northern Europe regarding how to portray Christ's physical features—all you have to do is sample pre-Rembrandt depictions of Jesus to see pretty common patterns in how his face and beard were depicted. So great an authority did the Nordic image of Jesus have, *Rembrandt and the Face of Jesus* tells us, that it was a radical and dangerous departure for Rembrandt to use living models for his Jesus taken from the Jewish quarter in Amsterdam. And it was only in mid-career and after that Rembrandt himself grew bold enough to re-imagine Jesus; his earlier depictions are much more conventional.

Rembrandt's decision to turn to contemporary Jewish faces in Amsterdam for a model or inspiration for his Jesus shows a radical skepticism about the Veil's—and Western painting's—claims to mimesis. Even more broadly, it suggests deep doubts on Rembrandt's part that *any* visual representation of Jesus could accurately "capture" or imitate his appearance, much less his essence or the meaning of his last moments on the Cross. If the Veil were a doubtful copy, why not turn instead for models to Semitic faces that lived in Rembrandt's Amsterdam neighborhood? For they at least perhaps would "represent" (at several removes) the type of faces common in Judea, then and now.

I don't think Rembrandt is really suggesting that his Jewish Jesus's face is more "accurate," however. Rather, Rembrandt may be questioning the fetish of appearances and "accuracy" itself, especially when it applies to the mystery of Jesus. Far more than just exhibiting concern for Jesus' external appearance, Rembrandt's work implies that visual representations of Jesus must work harder to suggest Jesus' *inner*, invisible powers. Rembrandt also seems to be suggesting that in telling Jesus' story artists may be focusing too much on external events—on the miracles Jesus performed and the spectacles these created. Rembrandt of course was drawn to the miracles too, as "Christ Preaching" memorably shows. But the greatest of Rembrandt's late Jesus portraits take a radical new turn: they look *inward*. And they do this by concentrating on Jesus' gaze.

The paradox about Jesus that Rembrandt's work proposes is of course a version of the central debate in Christianity itself regarding Jesus's identity and meaning.

How much of Jesus' mortal human self that we can see is "Him"? How much of Jesus' divine self is invisible and must be known by faith alone? Are the miracles (turning water to wine, raising the dead, healing the sick, and eventually being resurrect himself) truly the heart and essence of Jesus's meaning and power? Or is the greatest miracle of all inextricable from Jesus's most *human* act—his suffering and dying on the Cross, and all that flows from that? To what degree do we remain as blind as the Disciples, caught in the Emmaus paradox?

Jesus's Gaze

For Rembrandt, the eyes were windows to the soul. The gaze of Jesus and his actions with his hands, not his facial appearance, would become for Rembrandt the glass darkly

through which he, and we, could glimpse the power of who Jesus was and what his story might mean.

The "100 Guilder Print" ("Christ Preaching") to some degree portrays a warrior Christ: Jesus performing miracles in public in order to inspire crowds and confront and confound Jewish religious authorities (and also figures like his own Disciples!). In close-up in this print (when seen "live," not merely in reproduction), Jesus's eyes prove to be narrow slits, however: his face seems an impenetrable mask.

The half dozen or so small oil portraits of Jesus by Rembrandt and his studio at the heart of the Philadelphia exhibit reveal stunningly different images of Jesus. Stripped away is the crowd. Absent is any halo. Gone too is any dramatic spectacle—the powerful hand gestures, the miracles, the confrontation with earthly authorities. Jesus's hands are rarely even seen in these more intimate close-ups, and when they are they are sketched in as after-thoughts.

Instead, the small portrait paintings focus on the light on Jesus's face and, more importantly, the light in his eyes and the expression that conveys.

These images of Jesus reveal a stunningly contemplative, inward-focused gaze, unsure, questioning, even (in some examples) fearful or in pain. Sometimes Jesus looks above and beyond us the viewers, as if in prayer or appeal. Most often Jesus looks to one side, half his face in shadow, caught in a moment of private thought and feeling as if completely unaware of any other person present. Here is one of my favorites, the one used for the cover of the book that accompanies the exhibition:

We can't define what this gaze reveals. Any certainties our words would claim, these too must fail. Yet in this gaze's private, unnameable, and supremely human expression lies its power. Some of the exhibit's commentary suggested that these images try to capture the moment when Jesus realizes what lies ahead of him, including betrayal and crucifixion. Or when, in private, he meditates on his impossible responsibilities: how can one person, even if he is divine, help heal the entire world of sin, pain, and suffering? This commentary makes sense to me.

So deeply inward is Jesus's focus, though, that I also wonder whether Jesus might be *listening* in these portraits even more intently than gazing. Look at the illuminated ear in the above image, near the center of the picture. Listening to what, I wonder? Perhaps for

intimations of words he soon will say but can't now know, including "*Eli Eli lama sabachthani,*" "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me"? — words spoken on the Cross from the abyss of Jesus' suffering and despair, the only one of Jesus's seven sayings on the Cross reported in more than one Gospel.

Could Jesus hear, or see in his mind's eye, what was coming? If so, being part human, how could he not also then wonder whether he had the courage and the strength to go through with it? All these profound questions are suggested by this late portrait.

Rembrandt's images of Jesus, in the end, require from each of us a radically subjective response projected onto all these veiled images—just as the praying man's shadow falls on Jesus's robe:

Rembrandt's Jesus becomes divine only if we can *see* him as profoundly human, rarely robust with the radiant certainties of a divinity. He's literally shadowed with the same shadows that veil each of us in this life. And these images of Jesus—especially the ones in the small dark oil portraits—make most representations of Jesus by other artists look facile and fatuous.

For Rembrandt *this* was a better mimesis, one able to suggest Jesus's inner life, not the outward displays of power that anyone could see. Yet this was also, paradoxically, the truer mimesis of a visual artist who doubted the accuracy of mimesis itself. Yet it's also characteristic of this great visual artist that in his skepticism about mimesis and the visual arts themselves that Rembrandt turned for inspiration to contemporary appearances, including the Jews in his own urban neighborhood, his own "glass darkly" in this world.

A footnote: for another, almost equally stunning transformation of traditional Christian depictions of another famous moment, see Henry Ossawa Tanner's *The Annunciation* (1898); it depicts the moment when an angel tells Mary that she's pregnant with Jesus. Browse the Internet and look at how Tanner represents the angel. Equally moving is the expression on and angle of Mary's face: could Tanner have been inspired by Rembrandt?

Tanner, I'm proud to say, was trained at the Philadelphia Academy of Art, and *The Annunciation* may be seen at the Philadelphia Museum of Art across town. It's always been one of my favorite paintings in Philadelphia.

For a bibliographic note, see the next page.

As well as the Rembrandt exhibit at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the following text was a source of inspiration for this essay. The contributors to *Rembrandt and the Face of Jesus* are not culpable for any of the assertions in this essay of mine.

Rembrandt and the Face of Jesus. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Mark S. Tucker, author, and Lloyd DeWitt, editor. With preface by Seymour Slive and essays by Blaise Ducos, Franziska Gottwald, George Keyes, Shelley Perlove, Larry Silver, and Ken Sutherland. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art. Published in conjunction with Yale University Press, 2011.