

## 'Horrible nature, incomparable art': Rembrandt and the depiction of the female nude

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At the beginning of the eighteenth century, when Arnold Houbraken devoted a passage in his biography of Rembrandt to the latter's portrayals of the female nude, he first stated that naked women were 'the most glorious object of the artist's brush' and had been depicted by the most renowned masters since time immemorial.<sup>1</sup> This introduction, however, is followed by devastating comments on Rembrandt's nudes: they are too pathetic for words – disgusting, no less – and, he maintains, it is surprising that such a great man could be so obstinate as to depict them thus. He adds that Rembrandt took the same view as Caravaggio (1571–1609/10), who, according to Karel van Mander (1548–1606), is supposed to have said that one should only imitate nature, anything not painted from life being a futility.

Houbraken was by no means the first to voice such criticism and he would certainly not be the last. That he combines his criticism with an explicit reference to the ideology of Caravaggio, as well as with the idea that all great masters have painted the female nude because this is the loftiest aim a painter can strive for, makes his commentary, as we shall shortly see, very enlightening indeed. Like Houbraken, Rembrandt, too, must have been well aware of the special prestige enjoyed by this tradition: everything points to the fact that rivalry with the celebrated painters of the past was of great importance to Rembrandt as regards this kind of subject matter in particular. In painting the female nude he hoped to secure a place among the greatest in his profession.

Why, then, did the outcome vary so much from the prevailing conventions, with the result that for centuries his nudes were found distasteful? Were Rembrandt's nudes a subject of controversy in his own day or, as has been continually stated in recent decades, did they become controversial only after his death, by which time theoretical views of art and beauty had changed?<sup>2</sup> To begin answering these questions we shall first have to follow Rembrandt's earliest steps in the field of the female nude, a field that has traditionally been full of pitfalls in the history of Western art, not least because of the sexual overtones implicit in male observation of a nude female body portrayed by, and for, men.

When Rembrandt made his first appearance around 1630/1 as a painter of the female nude with his depiction of *Andromeda* (fig. 36), which was also his first painting of a mythological subject, he was no doubt well aware of his many illustrious predecessors who had already depicted this theme.<sup>3</sup> In portraying Andromeda Rembrandt chose a subject which, more than any other representation of a nude, had been frequently depicted in prints at the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth century by the renowned Hendrick Goltzius and artists of his circle (fig. 37).<sup>4</sup> Rembrandt would also have learned from reading

Karel van Mander's biography of the admired Titian that this great master of the nude had painted a famous *Andromeda*, and he probably knew a print of this composition as well. And from hearsay he might have known that Rubens had even painted the subject on the garden façade of his house. Moreover, from Van Mander's biographies of painters of antiquity, he could have heard of the erstwhile existence of a naked Andromeda by the celebrated Greek painter Nicias.<sup>5</sup>

Its traditional pictorial scheme – Andromeda chained to a rock, rendered frontally as a nude figure forming the focal point of the composition – made it the perfect subject for an artist who wanted to show off his ability at depicting naked female beauty. The four engravings after designs by Goltzius, therefore, provide fine examples of his ideas regarding the portrayal of the anatomy and proportions of the female body, ideas which changed radically during the course of his career.<sup>6</sup> That the subject could function as a kind of showpiece was probably an important reason for Rembrandt's choice of Andromeda for his first nude. In addition, it was a distinctly 'exciting' subject that demanded the rendering of powerful emotions, something that occupied Rembrandt intensely during this period.<sup>7</sup> Besides, the Andromeda theme is a prime example of a subject with great erotic appeal, featuring a young woman famous for her beauty, who finds herself in an extremely distressing situation: chained up and threatened by a ghastly sea monster. The hero of the story, who falls in love the moment he sees her naked, fettered body, will save her at peril to his own life.

Because the overall design of Rembrandt's composition conformed with the basic scheme usually seen in representations of Andromeda, the effect produced by the deviations was all the more powerful. By leaving Perseus' battle with the monster 'out of the picture' – something that had never been done before – and having Andromeda react to something we cannot see, Rembrandt created a strong feeling of suspense.<sup>8</sup> The most striking feature, however, is the fact that Andromeda's naked body is not idealised in the slightest, in stark contrast to all the examples of this subject which Rembrandt could have known.<sup>9</sup> In Rembrandt's painting there is no trace of the customary, elegant contrapposto. Rembrandt visualised what her attitude could actually have been. Andromeda's body moves in a tense curve away from the monster, and her arms, tied together at the wrist, twist in a painful and far from elegant manner. The expression of fear is therefore more intense than in any earlier depiction of this subject. The very fact that the well-known compositions by Goltzius would have been the main point of reference, for Rembrandt as well as for connoisseurs of that time, clearly shows just how radical the deviations are. In contrast to what we observe

Detail from cat.69



in Goltzius, here we see a body completely lacking in stylisation, whose narrow upper body, twisted arms, breasts hanging to the side, hefty hips and bulky, protruding stomach all suggest that it was observed from life.

The pointed rejection of what was customary must have been a conscious choice on Rembrandt's part and would have been recognised by connoisseurs as something completely new.<sup>10</sup> Rembrandt used all the means at his disposal to intensify the viewer's empathy. The lack of stylisation results in the nude being brought much closer to the viewer's sphere of perception. It strengthens the impression of the girl's helpless vulnerability, which Rembrandt further heightened by highlighting her naked body against the dark and threatening background. The texture and colour of her skin – contrasting sharply with the hard, rough rocks – makes the fragility of human skin almost palpable. Rembrandt strove to suggest the skin of a living being by means of subtle shifts in tone, making use of visible brushstrokes that follow the bodily forms. In his first nude Rembrandt succeeded, even in this small format, in suggesting a nearly tangible female body.

In the same period or slightly later, Rembrandt produced two famous etchings from nude models (cat. 11 and 12). It is these etchings in particular that have been regarded with aversion over the years, eliciting, for instance, the following response from Kenneth Clark: '[They are] some of the most unpleasing, not to say disgusting, pictures ever produced by a great artist.' The portrayal of *Diana*, of which there is also a preparatory drawing (cat. 10), probably originated first.<sup>11</sup> When drawing this nude, Rembrandt must have had several renowned prints in mind (which he probably owned himself). An etching of *Susanna and the Elders* by Annibale Carracci (fig. 38), an etching by Willem Buytewech (fig. 39), as well as Buytewech's immediate example, a print after a composition by none other than Raphael (fig. 40)<sup>12</sup> – the last two representing Bathsheba at her toilet – were his respectable predecessors. Rembrandt, however, characterised her as Diana bathing in the woods by adding water, background greenery and a quiver.<sup>13</sup> She sits not on a nondescript drapery but on an undergarment whose cuff hangs down, which strengthens the impression that she has just undressed.

Placing the nude in this context has distinctly voyeuristic implications for the viewer, because any art lover familiar with the conventions of painting and printmaking who saw an undressed Diana bathing would immediately recall the popular representation in which Actaeon spies on the naked Diana and her nymphs, a subject that Rembrandt would also depict a few years later in a painting.<sup>14</sup> This means that the viewer sees a woman, who – just like Bathsheba and Susanna, likewise spied upon while bathing – arouses 'forbidden' desires in



Fig.36 left | Rembrandt, *Andromeda*  
Mauritshuis, The Hague



Fig.37 right | Jansz Saenredam (1597–1665) after Hendrik Goltzius (1558–1616), *Andromeda*  
British Museum, London



Fig.38 | Annibale Carracci (1560–1602),  
*Susanna and the Elders*  
British Museum, London



Fig.39 | Willem Buytewech (c.1591–1624),  
*Bathsheba*  
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Fig.40 left | S. Badalocchio (1585–after 1621?) after Raphael (1483–1520), *David Observing Bathsheba in her Bath*, in *Historia del Testamento Vecchio*, 1607 (detail)

Fig.41 centre | Jacopo Caraglio (c.1500–1565) after Raphael (1483–1520), *Alexander and Roxanne*  
British Museum, London

Fig.42 right | Wenceslaus Hollar (1607–1677) copy after Rembrandt, *Seated Female Nude*  
British Museum, London



a number of aspects Annibale Carracci's *Susanna*, but her attitude recalls most of all *Roxane*, the bride of Alexander the Great, as she appears in a print by Jacopo Caraglio after a drawing by Raphael (fig.41).<sup>15</sup>

Just as in *Diana*, the mound of earth and the cursorily indicated greenery suggest that this woman – like Susanna, Bathsheba and Diana – is sitting outside in an undressed state. The support of a recognisable subject has, however, been omitted; it is left to the viewer to see her as either Susanna, Bathsheba or Diana (with all the accompanying voyeuristic implications) or simply as a model posing. In the latter case the viewer would have considered her to be a faithful portrayal of a dissolute woman, presumably a prostitute.<sup>16</sup>

A clothed version of *A Seated Female Nude* (cat. 12) is to be seen in a painting, dated 1633, of a woman at her toilet, dressed in a sumptuous, fantasised costume and draped with jewels (cat. 20).<sup>17</sup> Her figure – the narrowness of the upper part of her body giving way to the enormous sprawl below – is also the same. If we imagine her undressed, then the lower part of her body is, if possible, even more massive than that of the nude. We also see this silhouette in the portrait of *Oopjen Coppit* (fig. 17), the most fashionable and representative portrait of a young woman that Rembrandt made in this period. Anne Hollander, commenting on the etchings discussed above, is probably right in saying that 'the intention to make these bodies look not only "realistic" but specifically desirable is conveyed by their resemblance to the currently modish clothed look for ladies: high waistline, plump but narrow shoulders, huge stomach, and lots of rippling texture – in these instances flesh not silk.'<sup>18</sup> Thus Rembrandt suggests not only that the outward appearance of these young women has been faithfully portrayed from life, but also that their bodies, precisely where they deviate from classical proportions, conform to the bodily shapes that a viewer of that period found

attractive (compare for instance also cat. 31 and cat. 36).

In these etched studies from a nude model Rembrandt, competing with his illustrious predecessors, was striving to exhibit, by means of the etching technique, his unparalleled virtuosity in the lifelike depiction of a female body that gives the viewer a feeling of close proximity and directness. Rembrandt's success in this endeavour is apparent from the copy made by Wenceslaus Hollar in 1635 (fig. 42). Hollar, however, found it necessary to tone down the effect of directness by making the body's surface smoother and giving the figure a more statuesque character by means of sharper contours.

Several years later, in his painting of *Susanna and the Elders* of 1636 (cat. 69), Rembrandt continued along the path he had taken with the *Andromeda*, using all the means at his disposal to portray and evoke powerful emotions in a narrative painting.<sup>22</sup> In depicting *Susanna* he chose a subject that was the most popular vehicle for the depiction of the female nude and one that explicitly treated the forbidden act of spying on a young, chaste beauty who has taken off her clothes to bathe, thereby unwittingly arousing the basest desires of those spying on her, the lecherous elders who will eventually be punished with death. The viewer, who in fact finds himself in the same position as the spies in the picture (though with a much better view of *Susanna*), need fear no punishment for enjoying this beauty, traditionally considered a prime example of threatened chastity. That sensual delight was the subject's greatest attraction is corroborated by the playful identification with the elders found in a letter from the English ambassador to The Hague, Sir Dudley Carleton, who wrote to Rubens that he hoped the *Susanna* he was making would be so beautiful that she could even make old men fall in love with her.<sup>23</sup>

Countless great painters had portrayed this subject before, and Rembrandt would have been



familiar with prints of various compositions by Hendrick Goltzius, Cornelis Cornelisz van Haarlem and Peter Paul Rubens, as well as the famous etching by Annibale Carracci mentioned earlier (fig.38).<sup>24</sup> A composition by his teacher, Pieter Lastman, was the immediate point of departure (fig.43), but it must have been the compositions by Rubens in particular – especially the invention engraved by Lucas Vorsterman – that challenged him the most (fig.44). It was Rubens he wanted to surpass in the credibility of Susanna's reaction. Rubens's attempt to involve the spectator directly by having Susanna turn towards the viewer must have been an important stimulus to Rembrandt.

More pointedly than any painter before him, Rembrandt placed the viewer in the position of a spying elder. Susanna seems suddenly to be startled by something she hears – a rustling sound, for example, or a twig snapping. She does not see the men hiding in the shrubbery behind her. Rembrandt made the elders nearly invisible,<sup>25</sup> so that Susanna seems to be alone. All attention is concentrated on her. Susanna tries to cover herself, turning the upper part of her body away from the viewer. Attempting to stand up, she gives an impression of wavering imbalance, which emphasises the sudden agitation of her reaction. She turns with large, startled eyes towards the spectator, whom she confronts as the intruder who has frightened her into hiding her naked body. Even more strongly than in the *Andromeda*, Susanna's vulnerable helplessness is underscored by the isolation of her brightly lit body against the dark background. She is, as it were, the terrified captive of the viewer's gaze. The moral implications are hereby heightened, but at the same time the tension created by this erotically charged moment comes more powerfully than ever to the fore.

Susanna's skin, modelled in rather impastoed paint, is – even more so than that of Andromeda – almost palpably lifelike. The fact that Rembrandt incorporated into her attitude a very classical pose stemming from antique sculpture affirms all the more strongly his conscious rejection of any idealised stylisation of the naked body.<sup>26</sup> The by no means classical proportions of the body, which do, however, follow the shape of the fashionable silhouette, suggest a highly lifelike quality.

The awareness that a lifelike quality increases the involvement of the viewer, especially in the case of erotically charged paintings, was powerfully expressed at this time by Jacob Cats, whose moralistic poetry enjoyed great success. When Cats warns in *Huwelyck* (Marriage), his bestseller of 1625, against the titillating effect of paintings of female nudes, he adds that the better a painter is, and the more realistic his portrayals are, the more he confuses the mind of the viewer and the more serious the consequences.<sup>27</sup> Such moralistic concern was obviously not shared by Joost van den



Fig.43 | Pieter Lastman (1583–1633),  
*Susanna and the Elders*  
Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz  
Photo: Jörg P. Anders

Fig.44 | Lucas Vorsterman (1595–1675) after Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), *Susanna and the Elders*  
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



Vondel in a witty poem about a painting (unfortunately unknown) representing Susanna, in which he speaks appreciatively of the stimulating effect this highly lifelike depiction has upon the viewer. After an enraptured description of her body – one could not help wanting to kiss her on the mouth, for example – he asks whether lifeless paint is capable of kindling such love and desire in us. He answers, of course, in the affirmative, pointing to the painter as the one guilty of producing this jolting effect: it is indeed as if one beholds Susanna in the flesh. Vondel hereby humorously turns the moralist Cats's warning into a reason for praising the painter.<sup>28</sup>

In a related poem by Jan Vos, in which he emulates Vondel, we detect, moreover, the writer's fascination with the immoral model whom the painter observed nude and portrayed true-to-life: to depict Susanna's beauty as convincingly as possible, it was necessary to portray an unchaste woman, remarks Vos. However, he states reassuringly, the depiction is only a semblance of reality, and therefore we do not have to fear the 'poison of her heart'.<sup>29</sup>

The more true-to-life the nude, the stronger the suggestion that one is seeing the specific – immoral – woman who posed for the painter. While this can in fact heighten the titillating effect, it makes the portrayal more problematic.<sup>30</sup>

As we have observed, Rembrandt's choice of subject matter was based on a keen sense of competition with his great predecessors, whom he endeavoured to surpass in the lifelike quality of his

nudes, depicting subjects with a marked erotic content. In *Andromeda* and *Susanna* he used this optimal suggestion of a nude portrayed from life to express emotions in the most powerful way possible and to induce the maximum amount of involvement on the part of the viewer. That this was in fact Rembrandt's main objective is confirmed by a sentence he wrote in a letter to Constantijn Huygens, in which he expresses his desire to render the greatest possible naturalness in emotions and gestures.<sup>31</sup>

Houben's statement that Rembrandt, like Caravaggio, was an adherent of painting 'from life' – thereby referring to Van Mander's phrasing of Caravaggio's ideology – certainly has to be taken seriously. When, shortly after Rembrandt's death, Jan de Bisschop and Andries Pels were the first to give vent in writing to fierce criticism of Rembrandt's nudes, stating that Rembrandt was unshakeable in his belief that 'life' provided the painter with the best and most perfect example, – there is also no reason to doubt their words.<sup>32</sup> A justification for this ideology was even found in anecdotes from classical antiquity, to which one often turned because of its great prestige. It is telling indeed that Van Mander closed his chapter on the portrayal of the emotions with a reference to the painter Eupomphus, who, according to the biography that Van Mander adopted from Pliny, supposedly said that one ought not to follow the example of the ancients but rather the examples seen around one, pointing to the men, women and children on a market square.<sup>33</sup> These words resound in the intentionally controversial statement made by Caravaggio and cited by Van Mander: anything not done from nature is a mere 'bagatelle, child's play or trifle', one only has to imitate life in all its diversity. He – Caravaggio –

never took up his brushes without having 'life' before his eyes. Van Mander, who must have heard this from an artist just back from Italy, added that this was all well and good, but first one had to learn to distinguish the most beautiful in nature.<sup>34</sup> Van Mander is therefore very ambivalent about this extreme standpoint and finds that both methods must be combined: working from nature and choosing the most beautiful through studying antiquity and other great examples.<sup>35</sup>

The debate about these two methods was already underway before Caravaggio took his stand, and continued afterwards as a focus of discussion in many an artist's studio. The difference between, roughly speaking, the line as the expression of the invention originating in the mind, which selects the most beautiful and the most exalted that nature has to offer, as opposed to the achievement of the most natural and lifelike expressiveness by means of painting from life, was first clearly formulated – in writing, that is – by Vasari after he and Michelangelo had seen a painting of the naked *Danaë* by Titian (fig.45). His account of the confrontation between these two differing views was adopted in its entirety by Van Mander. Vasari wrote that Michelangelo had had high praise for Titian's manner of colouring, but afterwards said what a pity it was that Venetian painters did not learn to draw properly and did not study examples: because, he said, there would have been no better painter than Titian if he had profited as much from studying the art of drawing as he had from making studies from nature and painting from life, for his manner of painting was very lifelike and natural. Vasari himself added to this (and Van Mander repeated it) that if one does not practise drawing and make frequent studies from fine examples, both antique and modern, one can

Fig.45 left | Titian, *Danaë*  
Museo di Capodimonte, Naples.  
Photo: © Lucaiano Pedicini / Archivio dell'arte

Fig.46 right | Rembrandt, *Danaë*, 1636  
State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg



never make anything perfect. Nature, after all, is not perfect; the knowledge of art is necessary to give it beauty and grace.<sup>36</sup>

This, in a nutshell, articulates the controversial standpoint that from this time on will attract both supporters and detractors, Titian being the epitome of painting 'from life', whose point of departure was light and colour instead of line. In Titian's biography, Vasari had already described – and this is also to be found in Van Mander – how Titian had developed a working method in which he completely bypassed the drawing stage and straightaway started painting from life. Vasari seriously disapproved of this method, but Van Mander did not repeat his censure.<sup>37</sup> 'Lively', 'seems to be alive', 'naturally fleshlike' and 'like reality' are notions we often encounter in Titian's biography, which must have been a great source of inspiration for a painter like Rembrandt.

After Vasari's discussion, painters could choose sides in this dispute, and we have already seen with what vehemence Caravaggio did this, Van Mander being the first to record Caravaggio's much talked-of standpoint. The heated discussions this caused in Rome during the first decades of the seventeenth century emerge, for instance, from statements made by Giovanni Baglione, a contemporary of Caravaggio. Baglione had to admit that Caravaggio's palette was wonderful and of great naturalness. But because Caravaggio always painted everything completely from life, the result was banal, lacking in everything that is essential to great art. Caravaggio himself thought he had surpassed all other painters, Baglione writes, but others were of the opinion that he had ruined the art of painting, because many younger artists had followed in his footsteps; they had not acquired sufficient knowledge of the fundamentals of drawing and were satisfied with working from life and taking delight in their choice of palette. To his sorrow Baglione had to admit that the finest connoisseurs of that time greatly admired Caravaggio's work.<sup>38</sup>

This controversy would have been taken back to the Netherlands by Rembrandt's teacher Pieter Lastman and all the others who visited Rome in the first decades of the seventeenth century. Unfortunately, practically nothing was written about art during this period in the Netherlands, but we nevertheless catch a glimpse of the fierceness with which this battle was waged in a curious pamphlet written by Jacques de Ville in 1628. De Ville furiously attacks painters who work only from life, have no notion of the art of drawing and attach importance only to a special manner of painting. He addresses himself just as scathingly to art lovers who gape in admiration at such a manner of painting and are willing to pay large sums of money for it.<sup>39</sup> In Lastman's studio, whether the young Rembrandt went in the first half of the 1620s, such issues would have been discussed frequently, and in

the following decades the adherents of the various standpoints would only have become more set in their opinions.

An echo of this is to be found in Joachim von Sandrart (1606–1688), who was in Rome in the first half of the 1630s, subsequently living in Amsterdam from 1637 to 1645. He must have had a lot of contact, first, with the painters' community in Rome and, later, with the most prominent painters in Amsterdam, including Rembrandt. The discussions taking place at that time resound in the words of Von Sandrart, who wrote much later in life about Caravaggio and Rembrandt. Von Sandrart uses the same kind of expressions when discussing both Rembrandt and Caravaggio. Rembrandt, too, supposedly said one ought only to follow nature and should not be bound by any other rules. Without worrying about clean contours, he was nonetheless able to portray superbly the simplicity of nature through the harmonious rendering of light and the use of natural effects in his colouring. Rembrandt could 'break' the colours very subtly and artfully, depicting the true and lifelike singularity of nature as though it were life itself. He hereby opened the eyes of many who, Von Sandrart states, tended to 'colour in' rather than paint.<sup>40</sup>

Clearly, similar terminology is used when Titian, Caravaggio and Rembrandt are ranged against the academic 'disegno' ideal. It reveals the terms used to discuss the various manners of working, and it would have been in such terms that the painters themselves – such as Rembrandt and his school on the one hand, and the group now baptised the Dutch classicists on the other – viewed the objectives of their art.<sup>41</sup> Certain passages of the treatise written many years later by Rembrandt's pupil Samuel van Hoogstraten also appear to reflect discussions that took place in the period of his apprenticeship in Rembrandt's workshop during the first half of the 1640s. For example, he twice repeats Vasari's story about Michelangelo's opinion of Titian's *Danaë*, which suggests that during Van Hoogstraten's apprenticeship, at the very time Rembrandt was working on his own spectacular *Danaë*, the story was a subject of heated debate.<sup>42</sup> Van Hoogstraten, who, during the course of his career as a history painter converted from a Rembrandtesque style to a classicising manner, says he would prefer not to judge, for 'their methods and views were very different': some think it best to concern oneself only with things beautiful, whereas others believe that everything created by nature is worthy of attention. Both schools of thought have their merits.

The side Rembrandt chose is obvious, and his decision to take *Danaë* as the subject of his first life-size nude therefore acquires the character of a manifesto (fig.46).<sup>43</sup> Besides, during the course of the sixteenth century, the portrayal of *Danaë* came to be seen as the prototype of a representation



Fig.47 | Jacob van Loo (c.1615–1670), *Awakening Iphigenia Observed by Cimon*  
Kunsthandel Hoogsteder & Hoogsteder, The Hague

whose aim was to stimulate the viewer's senses; there was, after all, a well-known story from classical antiquity in which the mere sight of a painting of *Danaë* excited a young man to such an extent that he raped a girl he was in love with.<sup>44</sup> This made it the perfect subject for painters who wished to compete with one another in the portrayal of as lifelike and sensuous a nude as possible. It is certainly no coincidence that the *Danaës* by Correggio, Titian and Rembrandt are among the most sensual nudes in the history of European art.<sup>45</sup> By painting a life-size female nude Rembrandt was placing himself in an illustrious tradition, going back to classical antiquity and revived in Italy, which, since the time of Apelles, could be seen as the loftiest ambition of every painter. By choosing this particular subject at a crucial moment in his career – he began the painting in 1636 and completed it in the first half of the 1640s – he was siding demonstratively with those convinced that a maximum of lifelikeness could be created by means of colour and light.<sup>46</sup> In addition, it gave him the opportunity to compete in the representation of sensual beauty with a legendary painting from classical antiquity, as well as with the famous *Danaë* by Titian, the greatest master in the field.<sup>47</sup>

More so than in Rembrandt's previous paintings, we see in his *Danaë* how he models the body by means of subtle nuances of colour that melt into one another and clearly visible paint texture.<sup>48</sup> He had now surpassed even Titian in the convincing suggestion of palpable, breathing skin.<sup>49</sup> Because the nude was life-size – this fact alone gives it a much greater feeling of proximity – Rembrandt depicted the bodily shapes in a more stylised manner than in his earlier paintings. But here as well we see very unclassical elements, by means of which he shows that his immediate point of departure was a living model: the squat proportions, the soft stomach sagging slightly to the side and the breast pressed upwards by the hand are all elements not found in other *Danaës* or recumbent Venuses. These traits underscore the naturalness and approachability of *Danaë*'s naked body. Rembrandt banned all unnatural elements from the picture by changing the shower of gold coins (traditional since Titian) raining down on *Danaë* – the golden rain into which Jupiter transformed himself – into a beam of glowing light.<sup>50</sup> The lover whose passion and desire have been aroused by *Danaë*'s beauty is announced only by the warm, sensual light that she welcomes with joy. Rembrandt has done everything in his power to elicit a response of sensual rapture.

In the 1620s and 1630s Dutch painters hardly ever portrayed life-size female nudes, but Rembrandt's *Danaë* marks a new development in this respect. Starting in the 1640s various Amsterdam painters applied themselves to this subject, and they seem to have been competing with one

another for the favour of collectors from the Amsterdam elite. One of the painters who specialised in representations of nudes was the slightly younger Jacob van Loo. When making his painting of the *Awakening Iphigenia Observed by Cimon* (fig.47), he took the pictorial scheme of Rembrandt's *Danaë* as his point of departure, and he undoubtedly did so to emulate Rembrandt in the rival working method based on drawing. Here the naked body is drawn with clear and precise contours and modelled with rather uniform illumination and smooth, invisible brushstrokes, whereby the clearly outlined forms are, as it were, 'coloured in'. In Van Loo's painting there is no accidental distortion and the bodily shapes and proportions are considerably more classical.<sup>51</sup> Although in our eyes Van Loo had no chance against Rembrandt, he did have more success with the subject, considering the number of nudes he painted. This was not because Rembrandt's exceptional qualities were not recognised, but because a nude in this 'classicising' style was less disturbing and therefore less problematic. Most people who wanted a life-size nude would probably have preferred one by a painter like Van Loo.

While Rembrandt's *Danaë* is one of the most sensual nudes in European art – something thoroughly in keeping with the nature and origin of the subject – his last painting of a female nude, the *Bathsheba* of 1654 in the Louvre (fig.48), is probably the most impressive. As mentioned above, the representation of Bathsheba is again a theme involving bathing and being spied upon by a man whose desire has been aroused. Ever since it was mentioned by the church father Jerome, this story has been cited as a preeminent example of the danger inherent in viewing naked beauty. Moreover, the portrayal of this subject became the Biblical prototype of a titillating representation. Since Erasmus had specifically mentioned Bathsheba as an example of a Biblical subject one ought not to paint, because seeing such paintings can only lead to sin, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century moralists often referred to it.<sup>52</sup>

As early as the sixteenth century Bathsheba was a much-loved subject in the Netherlands, but around the mid-seventeenth century it appears in large format in the work of such painters as Pieter de Grebber, Jacob van Loo, Jan Gerritsz and Johannes van Bronckhorst (fig.49).<sup>53</sup> The naked Bathsheba, more than any other subject featuring female beauty, must have been seen as the perfect challenge to painters. Unlike Venus, Diana, *Danaë* or Andromeda, she caused more than just pagan gods and mortals to take leave of their senses, and, unlike Susanna, it was not just foolish elders who found her beauty irresistible: it was the Biblical paragon of piety and steadfastness, the king of kings, who, upon beholding Bathsheba's beauty, could no longer control himself and fell from grace.

In Rembrandt's *Bathsheba* the spying king is

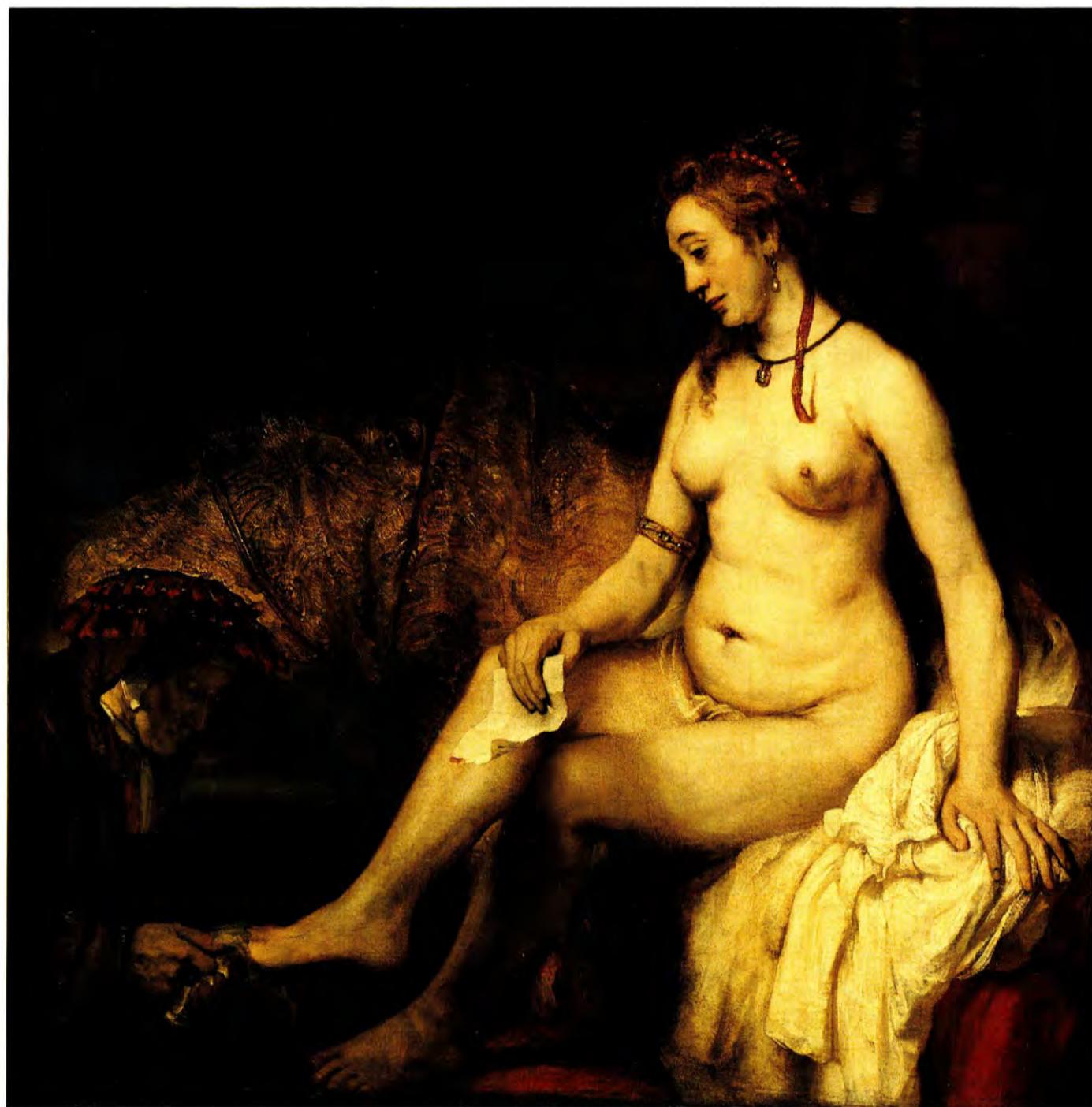


Fig.48 | Rembrandt,  
*Bathsheba with King David's Letter*, 1654  
Musée du Louvre, Paris  
Photo: RMN-Hervé Lewandowski

absent, causing the viewer himself to become the 'David' who beholds her.<sup>54</sup> Everything is aimed at producing a feeling of palpable proximity and corporeality. Bathsheba's body has been brought as 'close' as possible to the viewer: her left hand and right foot seem only centimetres from the picture plane. Never before had the naked body formed such a dominant presence. Only the shimmering gold brocade of her cloak gives the viewer's gaze the occasional chance to focus on something else. Moreover, unlike earlier Bathshebas, this depiction

lacks any indication of narrative action – there is no intimation whatever of movement or physical tension – so that there is nothing to distract the eye of the viewer from exploring her naked body.

Although Rembrandt would have been consciously striving to surpass all his predecessors in the rendering of the greatest possible lifelikeness in the portrayal of the epitome of female beauty, this was certainly not his only – and perhaps not even his most important – objective in painting this subject. Bathsheba's pensive expression and the



Fig.49 | Johannes van Bronckhorst (1603–1677),  
*Bathsheba at her Toilet*  
Palazzo Barberini, Rome / Bridgeman Art Library

conspicuous letter in her hand compel the viewer to empathise with her. The letter, which had become a convention in depictions of this subject, is here emphasised as never before, placed as it is in the centre of the painting with the unfolded page reflecting the bright light. By this means the viewer's attention is riveted on what cannot be visualised: Bathsheba's thoughts regarding David's request. The letter indicates that Bathsheba knows she is being observed and is aware of the consequences of her beauty. The viewer is thus forced to reflect on her thoughts and the choice she must make: either she chooses to forsake her virtue (according to seventeenth-century morals, the worst thing that could befall a woman) or she decides to disobey David's command (thereby denying her destiny as the mother of Solomon). The drama of such contradictory, unportrayable emotions thus becomes the focal point for the viewer, who meanwhile contemplates the cause of it all – her irresistible beauty. Here Bathsheba is no longer the ignoble seductress she was in earlier depictions, but rather the victim of her own beauty, a beauty that no one can resist, least of all the viewer of the painting.

Through the taut contours of the body and the simple, nearly relief-like structure of the composition, Rembrandt shows that no classicist need tell him what to do: he vanquishes them on all fronts. This figure, its shoulders broader and upper body longer, is somewhat more in keeping with classical proportions. But the rendering of the soft flesh of the stomach, hips and breasts once again gives an inimitable, true-to-life impression.<sup>55</sup> Rembrandt's development from a marked, almost aggressive suggestion of painting 'from life' to a matter-of-course naturalness combined with an impressive monumentality has here reached its climax.

This continual striving for an optimal suggestion of lifelikeness and nearness, as well as the involvement this demanded of the viewer, could explain why Rembrandt did not often paint a female nude. Arousing feelings and emotions was Rembrandt's primary aim, but this was risky in the case of nudes. Painters such as Jacob van Loo, the Van Bronckhorsts and Caesar van Everdingen concentrated much more on painting nudes; the greater distance created by a certain degree of stylisation made their paintings more acceptable. Not surprisingly, such Rembrandt pupils as Govert Flinck and Ferdinand Bol did not apply themselves to the nude until they had laid aside their Rembrandtesque style. In his portrayals of nudes, Rembrandt seems constantly to have explored the boundaries of what was possible within society's norms and the standards prevailing among a certain group of collectors who valued his work, norms and standards that were determined by both artistic and social conventions. There appears at this time to have been a group of art lovers who accepted as the highest aim of art, even in the case

of depictions of nudes, Rembrandt's belief in a nearly uncompromising naturalness and lifelikeness that served to evoke the greatest possible empathy in the viewer, by means of depictions experienced as being 'like life itself' and expressing the 'greatest and most natural emotion'.

When, after the mid-seventeenth century, the striving for ideal beauty – with classical sculpture as the indisputable yardstick – supplanted all other approaches to art, and viewing 'life as the best and most perfect example' was seen only as a serious lapse in judgement on the part of the previous generation,<sup>56</sup> Rembrandt's nudes could no longer be appreciated, at least not in the written sources. This ideology was coupled with a need for purifying the visual arts, theatre and literature – banning everything that could not be considered beautiful and lofty. In particular, the naturalism of the two early etchings (cat. 11 and 12), Rembrandt's most widely known nudes, so strongly evoked the presence of the naked woman who had been the model, that they were thought to be offensive and therefore encountered resistance until well into the twentieth century.<sup>57</sup> The specific nature of an individual body – the 'swollen stomach, hanging breasts', and, even worse, signs of having undressed, such as 'pinch marks in the legs caused by garters'<sup>58</sup> and 'traces of a laced-up corset in the stomach'<sup>59</sup> – was considered intolerable. Since Andries Pels had spoken of a 'washer woman or turf stomper' such depictions were often associated with the lower social classes. Kenneth Clark's 'disgust' and 'horrible fascination' express a sexual discomfort that could only be alleviated by nudes who did not come too close and did not demand direct involvement from the viewer.<sup>60</sup> But even these critics, from Pels to Clark, never denied that Rembrandt's nudes were the work of a great artist. The words of a nineteenth-century author commenting on Rembrandt's *Danaë* sum up these feelings nicely: 'horrible nature, incomparable art'.<sup>61</sup>

That Rembrandt wilfully followed a certain path seems indisputable, and in the case of the female nude this path must have been controversial even in his own day. Like Rembrandt himself, a section of the art-loving public would have considered his representations of nudes to be the pinnacle of a respectable tradition, and within this tradition their extraordinary effect could be held in high regard.

34. E. de Jongh, in Amsterdam 1997A, pp.337–40. Noordgraaf/Valk 1996, pp.71–2, are fairly sceptical about the standards of hygiene in seventeenth-century Holland, saying that ‘travellers can write what they like, we would have no trouble in sketching a picture that would horrify people living in the twentieth century of the filthiness of the streets, in the canals and in the houses, and even of people themselves in today modern times.’ (*Reizigers mogen schrijven wat ze willen, het zou ons niet moeilijk vallen een voor de twintigste-eeuwer onthutsend te scheiken van de vervuiling langs de straten, in de grachten en in de huizen, en van de mensen zelf in de vroegmoderne tijd?*) See also Vis 1996, pp.23–34, on bye-laws on rubbish in several towns, and p.71 (‘De mythe van de schone stad’).

35. Vis 1996, pp.19–20: ‘...crengen van dode honden, verkeersvondervullen...’; and Amsterdam 1997A, p.338.

36. Amsterdam 1997A, p.337. Rembrandt made two small etchings of a man and a woman urinating outdoors, although not in the presence of other people. See Gert Luijten in Amsterdam/London 2000–1, pp.105–7, and the present catalogue, no.15 (*A Woman Making Water*).

37. Van Deursen 1991, pp.81–3; Kloek 1995, pp.247–50.

38. Van Deursen 1991, p.91; Kloek 1995, pp.270–6.

39. See Schama 1987, pp.404–7; and Kloek 1995, pp.271–2.

40. Van Deursen 1988; Van de Pol 1996, *passim*.

41. Van Deursen 1991, p.10.

42. One such was Sophia Trip who, after her husband died, took over the running of the Coymans trading company, which had a staggering turnover of four million guilders a year; see Kooijmans 1997, pp.122–3.

43. On the churches and the various religious denominations in the Netherlands see especially Van Deursen 1991, pp.260–318. See also Kloek 1995, pp.268–9.

44. See Van Deursen 1991, pp.283–5, for *kloppes*. Judith Pollmann, in Pollmann 2000, draws attention to the relatively large number of women who were members of the Reformed Church in the seventeenth century. It seems that women were also in the majority in other congregations. According to Pollmann, women saw church membership as a way to enhance their ‘erelidheid’ (honour). Female religiosity practised outside confessional boundaries easily roused suspicion and was liable to condemnation.

45. The French School took advanced pupils from the wealthier families, the lessons probably being conducted in French. The Latin School was for boys who planned to go to university. On these and other forms of education, as well as the question of illiteracy, see De Booy 1980, pp.27–8; and Van Deursen 1991, pp.122–4. Spufford 1995, pp.248–63, concludes that, compared to other European countries, literacy was quite high in the Republic.

46. See Dekker 1995, p.45, on the education of Susanna Huygens.

47. Spies 1986. See also Raag 1988.

48. See Schenkeveld-van der Dussen 1979–80, on Anna Roemer Visscher; Smits-Veldt 1994, on Tesselschade; Van der Stighelen 1987, and De Baar et al. 1992, on Schurman.

49. The best-known of such works is *Van de wtewenheit des vrouwelijken geslachts* (On the excellence of the female sex), Dordrecht, 1639, by Johan van Beverwijk, the author of *De schat der gesenheit*. On the place of *Van de wtewenheit* within the tradition of propagandist writings of this kind, which were not always free of ambivalence, see Moore 1994. See also De Bruijn 1681, pp.111–19.

50. Haarlem 1993; and Kloek et al. 1991. For women in literature see Spies 1993; and Schenkeveld-van der Dussen 1979.

51. See the biographical sketch by S.A.C. Dudok van Heel in Berlin/Amsterdam/London 1991–2, vol.1, pp.50–67, and his essay in the present catalogue.

52. Vis 1965; Wijnman 1968; Strauss/Van der Meulen, pp.267, 270, 274, 276; Schwartz 1984, pp.240–8, regards Rembrandt as the evil genius in the conflict, although he does not exonerate Geertje. See also S.A.C. Dudok van Heel’s essay in the present catalogue.

53. See Ruessink 1989; Schwartz 1984, pp.297–8; and Dudok van Heel’s essay in the present catalogue.

54. Haks 1982, pp.105–19, 128–40; Van Boechemen 1989, *passim*; Hokke 1987. In general, unmarried women were not held in very high regard, certainly not when they grew old; see De Wild 1995.

55. See, for example, Haks 1982, p.118; Haarlem 1986, pp.165–6; and Kooijmans 2000.

56. Noordam 1987; Broos/Stoffers 1991, p.49; Dekker 1995, pp.200–1; De Jongh 2000, pp.79–90.

57. Knappert 1989, pp.31–2.

58. On midwives see Van Beverwijk 1637, II, pp.54–68; M.J. van Lieburg in Schrader 1984, pp.1–46; and G.J. Kloosterman in *ibid.*, pp.47–79. See also Schama 1987, pp.524–35; Van der Waals 1987, pp.14–15, 21–2; and Damstra-Wijmenga 1995, p.135.

59. See Dixon 1995, pp.38–58, on gynaecological theories in the Renaissance and the seventeenth century. See also Palfijn 1724, p.115.

60. Haks 1982, pp.143–50.

61. Van Eghen 1956.

62. Cornelia died before 8 December 1685 at Batavia (now Jakarta) in the Dutch East Indies. She had married at the age of sixteen or seventeen; see Schwartz 1984, pp.298, 300; and De Baar 1992, p.4.

63. See Kloek et al. 1991A.

64. Kloek et al. 1991A; and Broos/Stoffers 1991.

65. Benesch 1973, 707 recto, 708, 707a and 1073; although the attribution of the last two drawings does appear open to criticism. See also Giltaij 1988, p.53. The painter and collector Jan van de Cappelle owned 135 tekeningen sinds her vrouweleven met kinderen van Rembrandt.

66. Cats 1661, p.167: ‘Een dij haer kinders baert, is moeder voor een deel; Maer die haer kinders sooght, is moeder in ‘t geheel’; Van Beverwijk 1637, II, pp.75–84.

67. Cats 1661, pp.167–70; ‘...dickmael ongesint gestoerde borsten geft;’ Van Beverwijk 1637, II, pp.75; ‘Dat elcke Moeder haer eyghen Kinderen, soet het mogheliest, is behoert te suggen: ofte anders, wat Minne sy sal verkeissen.’ (That every mother should suckle her own children if possible, and if not which nurse she shall choose). The nurse had to meet all sorts of requirements. See also Kloek et al. 1991A, p.24; and Roberts 1998, p.84.

68. De Jongh 2000, p.79.

69. Badinter 1980.

70. Dekker 1995, pp.200–22; Kooijmans 1997, pp.79–80, 103, 153–4, 220; and Roberts 1998, pp.148–53.

71. As Gerard ter Borch the Elder did in the case of a small daughter who had died; see McNeil Kettering 1988, II, p.700; Alpers 1988, p.30.

72. Schatborn 1985, pp.26 and 32.

73. Giltaij 1988, pp.53 and 55.

74. On Flora see Held 1661. Flora had long been associated with several faculties: she could represent prostitution (Flora meretrix), but equally springtime or fertility; see Pauly 1979, cols.579–80.

75. For years there has been a difference of opinion about the answers to these two questions. Some

of the figures are seen as shepherdesses (the view taken by McNeil Kettering 1988, pp.58–62). In general it is worth taking to heart what Peter Schatborn wrote about a drawing of Saskia: ‘It was customary for artists to use members of their household as models, and Saskia is no exception’, see Schatborn 1985, p.32. Ger Luijten reads a Vanitas meaning into the portrait of Saskia with flowers in Kassel (1634, completed in 1642); see Amsterdam/London 2000–1, pp.165–6. Interestingly, Saskia was being adorned with flowers as early as the betrothal portrait of 1633. They decorate the brim of her hat, and she is holding one in her hand; see Berlin/Amsterdam/London 1991–2, vol.2, pp.29–31.

76. Benesch 1973, 448; Pieter van Thiel in Berlin/Amsterdam/London 1991–2, vol.1, pp.188–91.

77. See London 1992, pp.33–4 and Holm Bevers, Berlin/Amsterdam/London 1991–2, vol.2, pp.182–4.

78. Engravings after Raphael’s *Loggie*, partly by Sisto Badalochio and partly by Giovanni Lanfranco, were published in 1667 (*Hispania del Testamento Vecchio*). In 1615 there likewise appeared a series of etchings (in reverse) by Orazio Borgianni (*Raffaello Loggia del Vaticano*). Rembrandt certainly knew one or other of these series (see Timpel 1969, pp.163–4 and Sluijter 1998, p.59).

79. In the drawing, the quiver hangs in the tree behind her, whereas in the etching it lies beneath her hands.

80. For this subject in Netherlandish art and Rembrandt’s painting of *Diana with Actaeon and Callisto* (Museum Wasservogel Anholt), which will not be discussed in this article, see Sluijter 2000a, pp.26–8, 50–2, 59–61 (Rembrandt), 81–2, 103–12, 117–18 (Rembrandt).

81. Concerning this subject matter see, especially, Sluijter 1998, pp.76–81. Regarding the unfortunate Actaeon, he is portrayed as a lecherous voyeur, not in Ovid’s story, but in all the explications and commentaries dating from that time.

82. For Buytewech’s experiments with the etching technique, inspired by the Carracci, see Haverkamp Begemann 1959, p.10; for Annibale Carracci’s technique in this print, which is a combination of etching and engraving, see De Grazia Bohlin 1979, p.444.

83. For this dating see Melbourne/Canberra 1997–8, pp.390–1, no.99, where the authors remark, on the basis of the watermark (this information supplied by Erik Hinterding), that the etching was probably printed in 1631.

84. See Golahny 1983, pp.673–4. Amy Golahny correctly links this print to Rembrandt’s Bathsheba composition of 1643, but it would have been a source of inspiration for the earlier etching as well.

85. Van Mander 1604, *Grondt*, fol.29 recto and Van Mander 1604, *Leven*, fol.70 recto/verso (Pliny, *Nat. Hist.*, xxiv, p.61).

86. Van Mander 1604, *Leven*, fol.191 recto (an English translation of this text, the earliest on Caravaggio, is to be found in Friedlander 1955, p.260).

87. Van Mander 1604, fol.191 verso (Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, 1568, London edition 1878–85, vol.3, pp.574–5).

88. Van Mander 1604, *Leven*, fol.174 verso. For a discussion of the relationship between Van Mander’s text on Titian and that of Vasari, see Golahny 1984, pp.30–45. Van Mander attributes these innovations completely to Titian instead of to Giorgione, as Vasari does.

89. For the four prints after Golotius, the prints by Jacques de Gheyn II after Karel van Mander and Willem van Swanenburg after Jan Saenredam, see Sluijter 2000, pp.48–61.

90. Van Mander 1604, *Leven*, fol.176 verso (Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, 1568, London edition 1878–85, vol.3, pp.574–5).

91. Van Mander 1604, *Leven*, fol.174 verso. For a discussion of the relationship between Van Mander’s text on Titian and that of Vasari, see Golahny 1984, pp.30–45. Van Mander attributes these innovations completely to Titian instead of to Giorgione, as Vasari does.

92. For Baglione’s text (in *Le Vite de’ Pittori, Scultori et Architetti*, Rome, 1642), as well as an English translation, see Friedlander 1955, pp.23–6.

93. De Ville 1628, pp.3, 7, 11, 12, 14 (De Ville argues for the painting of architectural pieces, but this makes his criticism of certain practices less interesting). Jan de Brune the Younger also distinguishes between two kinds of painters; see Emmens 1979, p.166.

94. Von Sandrat 1675 (ed. 1925), pp.202–3. I disagree completely with Emmens when he says that Von Sandrat – proceeding from a new, classicist understanding that supposedly did not arise until after Rembrandt’s death – now projects the classicist criticism of Caravaggio onto Rembrandt as well, and that this does not tell us anything about the notions of Rembrandt’s own time. Although Von Sandrat would have embroidered upon his recollections over the years and his information is not always reliable, he does, in my opinion, give viewpoints that must have been under discussion for decades. Unlike Emmens, I am likewise convinced that the criticism voiced by De Bisschop, Pels and Van Hoogstraten did not arise only from theoretical ideas that developed later. As argued here, many aspects reflect discussions that had been going on for a long time.

95. For a detailed treatment of this subject, see Sluijter 1993, pp.37–46. For an overview of data and interpretations, see De Vries/Töth-Ubbens, *Froentjes* 1978, pp.121–31, *Corpus*, vol.2, pp.198–201 and Van Thiel in Berlin/Amsterdam/London 1991–2, vol.1, pp.196–9. Excellent observations on Rembrandt’s nudes are to be found in Schama 1985 and Schama 1999, pp.383–401.

96. See McGrath 1984, p.84: ‘La Susanna ha da esser bella per innamor anco li Vecchij ...’ (letter dating from 1618).

97. For these prints see Sluijter 1993a, notes 39 and 40.

98. Regarding these nearly invisible figures see *Corpus*, vol.2, p.189 and Berlin/Amsterdam/London 1991–2, vol.1, p.196.

99. Even the nudes in the prints of Lucas van Leyden, as well as a few nude figures portrayed by Pieter Lastman (who seldom attempted such

depictions; see fig.43) – all of which were important sources of inspiration for Rembrandt at this time – are statuette and idealised in comparison, and display entirely different proportions.

100. Cats 1625 (edition *Allie de Werken*, Amsterdam, 1712), p.387. See also Sluijter 1998, pp.79–81.

101. Concerning this poem see Porteman 1986 and Sluijter 1993, pp.44–6.

102. This poem is also printed in Porteman 1986, pp.314–15.

103. Dudok van Heel 1681 even describes a divorce case in which a painting of Mary Magdalene was used as evidence of a relationship that the owner supposedly had with the model who had posed for the painting, the prostitute Marie de la Motte. See also note 57 below. For *topot* of that time concerning the ‘erotic’ relationship of the painter to his model and the various consequences thereof, see Sluijter 2000, pp.138–44.

104. This concerns a passage from Terence’s *Eunuch*, which became widely known because it was cited by Augustine. See Sluijter 1999, pp.14–16 and 19 with further references to the literature (Carlo Ginzburg pointed this out much earlier).

105. The only known written reaction from a contemporary concerning these nudes – Giovanni della Casa’s letter to Alessandro Farnese, in which he wrote, among other things, that Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* seemed like a chaste nun compared to this *Danaë* – therefore states the case quite plainly (see Sluijter 1999, pp.21–24, with further references to the literature).

106. De Bisschop 1671, dedication to Jan Six (unpaginated), cited in Emmens 1979, p.72.

107. An apt expression of this attitude was prompted by the first experiments in nude photography, where the problem became even more acute: ‘... those sad nudes which display with a desperate truth all the physical and moral ugliness of the model paid by the session’ (Dideri, 1862, cited in Freedberg 1989, p.113).