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0521858259 - Rembrandt's Bankruptcy: The Artist, His Patrons, and the Art Market in
Seventeenth-Century Netherlands

Paul Crenshaw

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION:
THE CRUX OF REMBRANDT'S
BANKRUPTCY



This study examines the causes, circumstances, and effects of the 1656 declaration of bankruptcy by Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn (c. 1606–1669). The fact that one of the great artists of all time went bankrupt strikes people today, as it has since the seventeenth century, as a fantastic irony. The appreciation Rembrandt earned through his art and his financial collapse should not be seen as an incongruity, however, but rather as an intertwined phenomenon. One must see his whole professional and personal life, each set against the norms of his day, in order to fully appreciate the way that he conducted his affairs in the crucial period of the mid-1650s. The forging of his artistic career, in all its facets, had direct and deep resonance in his personal life, both positively and negatively. His widespread success and his acute failure were both based on extreme and deliberate actions meant to establish, maintain, and even challenge the limits of autonomy available to an artist within a newly developing type of art market and a dynamic cultural environment.

Following a highly successful beginning in Leiden and metropolitan Amsterdam, Rembrandt's wealth dwindled and his patronage base grew slender, even while his international fame spread. By the summer of 1656 his personal finances had deteriorated to such an extent that he was left with few alternatives. He was heavily indebted to several merchants, including some close acquaintances and one of the most powerful politicians in Amsterdam, and he had pledged all of his possessions several times over as collateral. To relieve his predicament Rembrandt applied for *cessio bonorum* – literally, “surrender of goods” – a type of insolvency whereby he ceded control of his assets to be sold by the local municipal authorities in order to repay his creditors, who in turn could have no further claim on him. To this end, the artist's household effects and immense art collection were inventoried by a representative of a city agency called the Desolate Boedelskamer, or Chamber of Insolvent Estates, and then were sold along with the house itself over the course of the following two years.

Rembrandt's poor management of his finances magnified other difficulties that he had with family, paramours, friends, neighbors, and patrons. Together, his economic and social exigencies affected his living and working environment, his

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public reputation, and his art. This study examines all of these aspects of the artist's financial problems, including his marketing practices, the appreciation of his work, and his relations with patrons, in addition to the details of the bankruptcy itself.

The study traces the documentary evidence from all periods of Rembrandt's life that shed light on its nadir, his bankruptcy. Too often in the past this phase has been portrayed as something that happened *to* him; here the matter is considered as a sequence of choices made and actions taken *by* him. The artist's attitudes, conduct, and motivations are assessed in relation to the options available to him. A consideration of the maneuvers of the people around Rembrandt, especially his creditors, is a necessary complement. Several patterns of short-sighted decision making emerge as Rembrandt managed his affairs within a constantly changing framework of relationships, a shifting set of obligations, and evolving artistic pursuits. The events surrounding him, and the choices made by him, demonstrate that Rembrandt handled his money and marketing in the same manner that he led his life and made his art: he was unconventional in every respect.

Rembrandt's financial difficulties began almost immediately when he bought a large house on the Sint Antonisbreestraat in 1639. He was forced to scramble to meet the initial payment deadlines. In 1647 Rembrandt's worth was appraised at more than 40,000 guilders, which would seem to have been plenty for him to pay off the house and live comfortably. However, at least three-quarters of that sum was made up by the house and its furnishings, including Rembrandt's collection of art, antiques, curios, medals, and marine plants. The type of spending leading to such an imbalance is in many ways typical of a *nouveau riche* merchant. Rembrandt purchased a house beyond his means, and he filled it with more objects than he could sensibly afford. He did not spend his money on secure investments or reliable enterprises that would ensure a continued income. After 1649 he made no more payments on his home, protracting a debt more than half the original purchase price of 13,000 guilders. When the house needed repairs in the early 1650s, he was unable to come up with the money, and by the end of 1653 he had accrued so many debts that he must have known he would never be able to repay them. Rembrandt's actions after this point were complex and have never been properly pieced together. Even though he operated narrowly within legal bounds, his manner of evading his responsibility to his creditors was so socially disreputable that laws in Amsterdam were quickly altered to prevent such actions.

The first chapter of the study serves as a historiography of the topic. Rembrandt's fiscal condition has fascinated writers from his earliest biographers to the most recent monographs. More than that, however, his bankruptcy has been a focal point in the construction of the artist's character, in the assessment of his career, and in the interpretation of his art. The bankruptcy is a barometer of Rembrandt's critical fortune.

In Chapter 2, Rembrandt's dilemma is surveyed against the backdrop of the financial failures of other Dutch artists in the seventeenth century. Rembrandt was

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certainly not alone in encountering strained finances, nor were the consequences of his bankruptcy as dire as they were for some others. The comparisons will demonstrate that Rembrandt's tumble into financial turmoil was far from unique, and certain customary sacrifices were expected in such situations. The remainder of the study will make it clear that Rembrandt's actions under the pressure of adversity differed radically from these socially accepted conventions.

The third chapter will consider three background issues that contributed to Rembrandt's fiscal woes: an apparent decline in his production and income in the 1640s and his questionable marketing strategies; a general economic downturn following the Peace of Münster, especially during and after the First Anglo-Dutch War of 1652–1654; and chaos in his personal life that affected his standing in the eyes of his community.

Chapters 4 through 6 elucidate three principal or more immediate causes of Rembrandt's bankruptcy: the tribulations of the house; his proclivity for spending money on works of art; and the deterioration of his patronage relationships, as seen acutely in his disputes with patrons.

Rembrandt's primary financial encumbrance was the townhouse that he purchased at the height of his fortunes in 1639. This is the focus of Chapter 4. The complicated events that led to Rembrandt's application for *cessio bonorum* all proceed from the unresolved debt on his house. The copious documentary evidence is related in chronological order from 1649 until 1658, or from the time Rembrandt ceased making mortgage payments to the point when he was forced to sell his house. New relationships are discerned in the archival record, illuminating the artist's decision-making process and the motivations of his creditors.

Chapter 5 takes as its starting point the conclusion of Filippo Baldinucci (1624–1696) in his *Cominciamento a progresso dell'arte d'intagliare . . .* of 1686 that Rembrandt's bankruptcy was caused by his lavish spending on works of art, including buying back impressions of his own prints at exorbitant prices. Diverse pieces of evidence are used to corroborate Baldinucci's statements. Although Rembrandt was not alone among Amsterdam collectors in his appreciation for the art of the previous century, his tastes seem to have been idiosyncratic enough to draw astonishment and criticism. Ultimately, the most destructive aspect of Rembrandt's collecting habit was not just the quantity or expense of his purchases, but the fact that he continued buying art even when saddled with enormous debts.

Chapter 6 examines several disagreements between Rembrandt and his patrons. Disputes with the Amsterdam patrician Andries de Graeff (1611–1678), the Jewish merchant Diego D'Andrade (1608–1660), and the Sicilian nobleman Antonio Ruffo (1610/1611–1678) form the basis of the study. Although Rembrandt was perfectly within his rights to defend the high quality and monetary value of his work in each case, his stubborn refusal to accommodate the wishes of clients and his insistent efforts to maintain his autonomy eventually destabilized his patronage base. Even when he desperately needed money, Rembrandt refused to compromise his artistic standards – a laudable trait, perhaps, but the

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deterioration of personal relationships led to many lost opportunities that could have prevented his bankruptcy.

Chapter 7 suggests how Rembrandt's reactions to his financial and social problems may have resonated in his art. His financial problems led to personal obligations that he repaid with pictures. The bankruptcy also radically changed the environment of his workplace. Suggestions are made to connect several of Rembrandt's works from the early and middle 1650s to his life's turmoil. The 1653 painting that Rembrandt shipped to Ruffo in Messina is regarded in light of the painter's patronage problems at home, whereas his pictures from the following year that feature Hendrickje Stoffels (c. 1626–1663) as a model are seen as responses to her out-of-wedlock pregnancy and public condemnation. Finally, in 1658, when Rembrandt's insolvency proceedings closed and he moved to a new house, several of his images may be seen as triumphant pronouncements heralding a personal renaissance.

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INTRODUCTION: WEALTH AND SOCIAL STATION

Rembrandt's critical reception in the generations following his death and in later centuries was distinctly shaped by the knowledge of his financial woes. Among seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century writers only Baldinucci mentioned the bankruptcy itself, but many others made an issue of Rembrandt's income and concomitant social position. Through the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth, authors embellished earlier biographical accounts with capricious tales, at the same time that scholars began to tabulate and catalogue the whole of the artist's oeuvre and fit his works into the program of his life. Nineteenth-century romantic views of Rembrandt and his work were fueled by new archival revelations about the bankruptcy and other intimate details of Rembrandt's life. These characterizations of him as a maverick genius continue to hold appeal, even as economic analyses and expanded biographical studies have provided fresh approaches in recent years. In each era Rembrandt's financial condition has been used not only to characterize the man and his work but also to promote diverse agendas.

Rembrandt's social station was a preoccupation of early commentators, most of whom espoused a notion of painting as a liberal art and favored painters who kept the graceful company of kings and courtiers. His earliest biographers noted his potential and early success in Amsterdam.¹ Later critics, however, assailed him as a *pictor vulgaris*, to use a characterization coined by Jan Emmens, taking Rembrandt to task for his low-brow manners, his failure to uphold a distinguished societal position, and his adherence to base nature in artistic pursuits.² Arnold Houbraken (1660–1719) was perplexed that Rembrandt could have earned so much money and collected so avidly and yet, as he stated, one heard nothing about a large estate at the artist's death. At least Houbraken gave Rembrandt the benefit of the doubt, suggesting that he lived in the manner proposed by Gratian: having frequented distinguished persons and becoming one himself, he then chose the company of ordinary men, seeking “not honor . . . but freedom.”³ Houbraken

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generally described Rembrandt as a bungling fool when it came to handling money. His humorous tales reinforced the characterization of Rembrandt as a low-class citizen.

Subsequent writers continued to embroider the Rembrandt biography with unfounded anecdotes.⁴ Gradually, however, the avid interest of print collectors and dealers began to shape the scholarship of Rembrandt. The personal inventory kept by Valerius Röver until his death in 1731 formed the basis of catalogues by Edme François Gersaint in 1751 and Adam Bartsch in 1797, establishing the scope of Rembrandt's print production.⁵ Eventually, the success of these catalogues fostered a similar project among painting connoisseurs. Along with this goal to compile all of the paintings came the desire to establish a factual underpinning of the full life of the artist. The search for documentary evidence in the archives of Amsterdam thus began to take shape in the early nineteenth century.

A Charterkamer, or Chamber of Records, was established in the Amsterdam Town Hall in 1675, and the archive was maintained by a clerk until 1748.⁶ The records of the Desolate Boedelskamer were kept apart from the bulk, escaping drastic purges of the chamber in 1789 and 1805, and periodic cleansings until 1819.⁷ Access to the archives was limited into the twentieth century.

Most of the early forays into the archives were undertaken by dealers and collectors who strove to promote Rembrandt with new information. In 1810, the Dutch art dealer and engraver Christiaan Josi published a catalogue of Rembrandt's etchings from the collection of Cornelis Ploos van Amstel in which he included for the first time some of the evidence about Rembrandt's art collection.⁸ Evert Maaskamp, an Amsterdam artist and print dealer, published more bits of information in 1828.⁹

The first extensive catalogues of Rembrandt's paintings were produced in the 1830s.¹⁰ Christianus Johannes Nieuwenhuis was the first to transcribe and publish a number of documents from the archives in his catalogue of 1834.¹¹ He stated his determination to combat the hearsay of earlier authors with facts. The English art dealer John Smith's monograph of 1836, part of a series of catalogues raisonnés of Dutch, Flemish, and French artists, included a well-balanced biography of Rembrandt. Some years earlier, the Dutch artist Albertus Brondgeest had conveyed to Smith information about Rembrandt's bankruptcy from the Amsterdam archives. This material included the inventory of Rembrandt's possessions taken by the Desolate Boedelskamer in 1656, evidence of some of the sales of the collection, and partial information about Rembrandt's loans.

Smith made fair use of the documentation at hand, realizing that it did not tell the whole story. He allowed for the possibility that Rembrandt's misfortunes were caused by political disturbances, or by his own mistake in some speculation. Judging from the number of portraits attributed to the master, Smith thought that Rembrandt's income should have been enough to sustain him. Smith did not believe that Rembrandt was underappreciated: "We may infer that his difficulties resulted from indiscreet conduct in the management of his affairs" rather

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than “insufficiency of encouragement.”¹² Smith discounted earlier stories about Rembrandt's desperate marketing endeavors, such as having his wife spread a rumor that he was dead in order to raise the value of his work, or having his son Titus (1641–1668) secretly sell his prints under the pretense that they were stolen. Smith offered one two other possible causes of Rembrandt's financial state. First, he proposed that Rembrandt may have been tempted by his Jewish patrons Menasseh ben Israel (1604–1657) and Ephraim Bonus (1599–1665) to part with his money for alchemical pursuits, as both men were “addicted to cabbalistic studies.” In the end, however, Smith would cast blame in another direction, and this would resonate throughout much of the subsequent literature. He knew only one of the several large loans that Rembrandt took in 1653 to pay the debt on his house, the one given to the artist by Burgomaster Cornelis Witsen (1605–1669) (Fig. 1).¹³ Smith suggested that Rembrandt's failure to meet the obligation to Witsen led the burgomaster to force the sale of the artist's possessions.

Others were more adamant than Smith about Rembrandt and Witsen, postulating an opposition between the artist and the political authority of his state. In 1837 Everhardus Johannes Potgieter wrote a tale based on the episode reported by Houbraken and Jan Campo Weyerman of Rembrandt's return home from The Hague after selling his first painting. The subject turns to the artist's insolvency at the end:

“Thirty-three years later [i.e., 1656], at the auction house of Bernt Jansen Scheurman, in a certain capital called Amsterdam, the Commissioners of Bankruptcy sold a most curious collection of furnishings from the house of a painter who lived in the Breestraat near St. Anthony's lock.

That painter was Rembrandt Harmensz van Rhijn; the creditor, at whose request the furnishings were publicly sold on the strength of a debenture on the house [was] Cornelis Witsen, burgomaster of Amsterdam.

How different from the fate of Rubens, the agent of princes, in Antwerp, or from that of Van Dyck, the favorite of Charles I, in London! Is it not somehow comforting to know that Rembrandt is as immortal as they?”¹⁴

Potgieter suggested that Rembrandt did not deserve his ill-fortune, certainly not at the hands of his own government.¹⁵ He transformed the artist from Houbraken's description of a ridiculous fiscal manager into a tragic hero who was not appreciated by the leaders of his own city.

A thread runs through the Rembrandt literature based on this assessment of Rembrandt's social standing. The theme of the artist as a misunderstood champion fighting against the corrupt leaders of his city held wide appeal. It reinforced popular notions in the Romantic era which saw him as a subjective genius and

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bohemian outsider.¹⁶ It appealed to populist critics such as Théophile Thoré, who lauded the Realism of the Dutch school and praised its bourgeois ideals.¹⁷ It was adopted by Marxist scholars in the twentieth century, many of whom concluded that the changes in Dutch art after 1650 resulted from the *nouveau riches* merchant leadership losing sight of the ideals of the revolution against Spain.¹⁸

Among left-wing partisans this trend of attributing Rembrandt's bankruptcy to class conflict persisted until the socialist Arnold Hauser (1892–1978) shifted the focus to the Dutch economic infrastructure in his widely read study *The Social History of Art* of 1951. Hauser contended that a lack of government regulations had given rise to a fiercely competitive free-market economy that was not conducive to the most innovative artists. By this model, the financial troubles of the Rembrandts and the Halses in particular (although he listed many artists who failed to support themselves with their work) were seen as consequences of economic freedom and anarchy in the realm of art, for the first time in history.¹⁹

ARCHIVAL CORRECTIONS

Returning to the shapers of Rembrandt's biography in the nineteenth century, credit for pioneering a sustained inspection of the archives must be given to Pieter Scheltema (1812–1885). In 1848 he was appointed the first official archivist of the city of Amsterdam, and five years later Scheltema gave a groundbreaking address to the Amsterdam society "Arti et Amicitiae" on his latest findings with respect to the life of Rembrandt.²⁰

The archivist set out to defend Rembrandt against the unfounded accusations made by Houbraken and his followers, countering long-standing fictions with fresh biographical facts. He provided new information about Rembrandt's family, including the death of his mother and her inheritance; his wife Saskia van Uylenburgh (1612–1642) and her family, which he characterized as a wealthy and respectable Friesland clan; Saskia's death, including the terms of her will; some incomplete information about Rembrandt's later paramours, whom Scheltema wrongly assumed the artist to have married; and new details on the date of Rembrandt's death.

Highly important for Scheltema was the interpretation of Rembrandt's bankruptcy. Unknown to Houbraken, the insolvency demonstrated for Scheltema that Rembrandt could not have been earning a fortune from his work as the earlier author had asserted. He defended Rembrandt's low station without blaming the Amsterdam regents for abandoning the artist: "It is quite possible that Rembrandt was acquainted with simple bourgeois people of a low class, and even that he sought their society, without there being anything dishonorable in him so doing."²¹ Simultaneously, Scheltema demonstrated that Rembrandt did indeed have highly placed contacts in Constantijn Huygens (1596–1687), Frederick Hendrick (1584–1647), Jan Six (1618–1700), and others.²²

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1. Artus Quellijn, *Portrait of Cornelis Witsen*, c. 1658, marble, Paris, Musée du Louvre. © Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY.

Scheltema discounted all previous speculations about the dissipation of Rembrandt's fortune. Instead he offered an historical explanation, albeit one based on imprecise generalizations about the Dutch economy and incorrect assumptions about Rembrandt's affairs. After the first half of the seventeenth century, Scheltema reasoned, the treasury of the state was exhausted by war, leaving commerce in a pitiable condition. He relayed the fact that the year 1653 saw Amsterdam

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with at least fifteen hundred empty houses. The poor economic conditions, and especially the government's reduction in the interest rate to be paid on debts from the war, caused a contraction in the art market. He also thought that Rembrandt must have remarried about this time, to Hendrickje Stoffels, and that he would have been obliged under the terms of Saskia's will to turn over the portion of the estate due to Titus. "On account of the badness of the times," Scheltema argued, Rembrandt's collection brought little money when it was auctioned. To reiterate, in Scheltema's view it was not the opposition of Witsen that brought about Rembrandt's ruin but the necessity to sell his possessions as a condition of remarriage and the fact that he was compelled to do so in the midst of an economic depression. Scheltema was not correct about Rembrandt marrying Hendrickje, but the archivist was right that the terms of Saskia's will did cause problems for the artist, as discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 of this study. It also will be demonstrated that Scheltema was not mistaken about the effects of war on the value of the Rembrandt's goods – however, it was the First Anglo-Dutch War that played a critical role.

In the monographs that followed Scheltema's initial revelations, Rembrandt was largely absolved of responsibility for his financial difficulties. Eduard Kolloff's *Rembrandts Leben und Werke* of 1854 integrated Scheltema's biographical facts with a chronological oeuvre catalogue.²³ The paramount interest for Kolloff (1811–1879) was to demonstrate the moral integrity of Rembrandt's works, so much that he considered inadmissible the characterization of his personal moral failings made by earlier writers. When Rembrandt's life and character were held beyond reproach, his social and economic decline was blamed on general economic conditions or on the vagaries of ill-fortune.

In the writings of Emile Michel (1828–1909), Rembrandt's genius in painting was reinforced by the characterization of his ineptitude in the world, especially in money matters.²⁴ More specifically – and mistakenly – Michel initiated a new myth which blamed Rembrandt's social exclusion, economic ruin, and eventual bankruptcy on the "rejection" of the *Nightwatch*.²⁵ This idea gained momentum and popularity early in the twentieth century when it was endorsed by Carl Neumann and Frederik Schmidt-Degener, among others. Despite its lack of any foundation, the story was repeated as fact in respectable publications well into the mid-twentieth century.

After Scheltema shed light on the resources available in Amsterdam's archives, Nicolaas de Roever and Abraham Bredius expanded the search into material that was previously unavailable to self-described "men of science."²⁶ They gained unprecedented access to depositories of notarial records, and Bredius went on to lay the foundations of biographies for more Dutch artists than any historian since Houbraken.²⁷ Several chapters of the present study, especially Chapter 2, could not have been written without his spadework.²⁸ Among the most important findings by Bredius and De Roever were the conclusive details of Rembrandt's affair with Geertje Dirckx (c. 1605/1610–after 1656), most of which were kept out of the popular press for the next seven decades.²⁹ The contributions