Rembrandt Peale in Paris

Rembrandt Peale spent about sixteen months in Paris during two visits, the first, from June to September, 1808, and the second, from October, 1809 to October, 1810.\(^1\) After a tour of Italy in 1830, he returned to the French capital, but it was the early visits that made a difference in his works and career. Experiences from those trips brought new qualities to his paintings of portraits and history subjects and changed forever his expectations for his own career as an artist.

Paris was an exciting place during the first decade of the nineteenth century. France was then the youngest nation in Europe—the youngest nation in the world—vigorouos, self-confident, audacious. Taking up the burdens of Empire, the French had dropped some of the arrogance of the Republic and returned to such familiar patterns as the universal calendar and the reinstitution of the church. But the intensity fostered by the heady days of Revolution and Republic remained in the self-assurance of men who had determined their own fate and were now determining the destiny of Europe. Even the enemies of France eagerly adopted her taste and her fashions.

Rembrandt was lured to “great Imperial Paris” by a fabulous creation of these years, the Louvre galleries of paintings, sculptures, and decorative arts, formerly in the French royal collections and palaces and churches throughout the continent.\(^2\) With painstaking

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\(^2\) “Rembrandt . . . has determined to profit by the treasures of the Louvre and the Vatican,” wrote Charles, Willson Peale to Thomas Jefferson, February 21, 1808, in describing the anticipated journey. Lillian B. Miller, ed., *Collected Papers*, II-A fiche 42, Thomas
effort, Dominique Vivant Denon, Director General of the Musée Napoleon (the official name of the Louvre), had arranged over one-thousand of these works into a chronological sequence according to national schools. The impact of that collection, which would be a marvel even in our own time, was increased by the fact that in the early nineteenth century only three national museums of art were open to the public, at Dresden, Amsterdam, and Florence, and these consisted mostly of works from the local schools.

Another unique attraction in Paris was the presence of Napoleon Bonaparte. As man or myth, his life and deeds formed an appropriate entrée to the nineteenth century, which was to be an era of hero worship, a time when biography became a major literary form and portraiture a major type of painting.

The ostensible purpose of Rembrandt’s trips to Paris was to paint portraits of French scientists, writers, and artists for the gallery of Great Men in the Peale Museum in Philadelphia. His father, Charles Willson Peale, had justified the expense of the journeys on that basis. This aim also provided additional rationale for Paris as Rembrandt’s destination, for at this time most American artists going abroad went to London to study with Benjamin West. Rembrandt himself had done so, in 1802 and 1803, while in England to exhibit the mastodon skeleton unearthed in New York. He could have profited by another visit to London, but now he was determined to go to the French capital. His decision was probably encouraged by Robert Fulton, the ingenious inventor who was also a painter. Fulton had a firsthand acquaintance with the advantages of Paris for a young artist, and Rembrandt saw him in 1807, just before his trip.

Much to the astonishment of his father, young Peale cut short his first visit. Away from his family, he had become terribly lonesome, and he feared also that the war in Europe would flare up and isolate him on the continent. Those few months spent in Paris proved

Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress. C. Edwards Lester in *Artists of America* (New York, 1846), 207-208, quotes Rembrandt as recalling, “I visited France to enjoy the magnificent assemblage of the works of art, which formed a part of Napoleon’s ambition.”

3 Rembrandt wrote from Paris on August 25, 1808, just before leaving for the return trip home, “my ambition almost dies away when put in the balance against domestic happiness.” Quoted in a letter from Charles Willson Peale to Angelica Robinson, October
tantalizing, however, and a year later he returned to France, this time taking with him his wife, Eleanor, and their five children. With the three oldest children in school, the family settled into their Parisian life.

Thirty years old and with a sound training in painting advanced by study in London, Rembrandt arrived in Paris as the son of a respected natural scientist and an acquaintance of Thomas Jefferson. He had an adequate knowledge of the French language and was able to profit from letters of introduction sent on his behalf by his father and Jefferson to leading Frenchmen in science and art. In completing his assignments to paint these great men, Rembrandt documented the wealth of his contacts: natural scientists like Georges Cuvier, a pioneer in the study of fossils and a correspondent on that subject with Charles Willson Peale and Thomas Jefferson; writers like Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, a naturalist and author, best known in the United States for his story of Paul and Virginia; and men from the world of art. Most impressive of these were Jacques-Louis David, revolutionary in art and politics and still leader of the French school of painting; the sculptor Jean Antoine Houdon, who shared with Rembrandt the experience of creating an image of George Washington from life; and Dominique Vivant Denon, museum man extraordinaire.


5 Bernardin de Saint-Pierre expressed his admiration of Rembrandt's portraits in his correspondence and, at Charles Willson Peale's request, he wrote a brief autobiography which was probably displayed with his portrait in the Peale museum. Richmond Laurin Hawkins, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre and Peale's Philadelphia Museum. The History of a Portrait. Reprinted from The Romantic Review XX, 1 (January-March, 1929). Permanent Collection of Painting and Sculpture, Correspondence, etc., the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Microfilm Roll Number P 77 in the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Portraits of Cuvier, Bernardin St. Pierre, Denon, and Houdon were among those brought back by the artist after his first visit. Letter from Charles Willson Peale to Thomas Jefferson, November 12, 1808. American Philosophical Society, Peale-Sellers Collection, L.B. IX, 106.
(his portrait by Rembrandt, Fig. 33), another gracious host to young Peale. Some years later Rembrandt was to assert that Denon preferred his portraits to those of French artists and offered him a position as official portrait painter of the Empire. Although this claim was probably exaggerated, Denon doubtless was a source of personal encouragement to the young American.

Through conversation with Denon, David, Houdon, and other artists, and by visiting their studios and seeing many works—in process and completed—Rembrandt was able to study French art closely. He afterwards affirmed that he had "learned the rudiments of art with his father . . . but did not commence the study of its principles until he went to France."

Along with most American artists, Rembrandt's primary activity was portrait painting and, consequently, he took a serious interest in French approaches to portraiture. While the tendency of historians to associate the British school of painting in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with portraiture and the French with grandiose themes from history and literature is not without basis, this view overlooks the quality and quantity of French portraiture. As a matter of fact, in Paris portraiture was the most common occupation of painters, the most patronized kind of art, and the most popular type of subject-matter at the Salon exhibitions. During the upheavals of the Revolution members of royalty and the aristocracy, the traditional sources of patronage, were swept away, and artists had to adjust to the taste of new patrons including the nouveau riche, business men, and middle-class politicians. Changes in patronage, initiated during the Republic, continued to occur under the Empire, when the popularity of landscape and genre paintings was exceeded only by the demand for portraits. At the Salon exhibitions of contemporary art held during the Republic and the Empire, portraits comprised about forty percent of the paintings, while themes based on classical antiquity accounted for less than four percent. French artists had exceptional

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survival skills: if portraits were wanted, they painted portraits. David himself, in the decade between his monumental Brutus of 1789 and the Sabines of 1799, painted mostly portraits. Even François Gérard, whose works were particularly admired by Rembrandt, could not sell his highly acclaimed Salon pieces, the Belisarius and Cupid and Psyche, and so turned to portraits—which came to constitute the greater part of his life’s work. French portraiture was thus considerably enriched by the greatest masters of French painting, who devoted much of their time and creative energy to that branch of art.

David’s portrait of his wife from 1813 (Fig. 34) reveals characteristics that distinguish French portraits of this era. The artist presented his subject as a three-dimensional figure that convincingly exists in space. Details and textures of flesh, hair, and fabric are astonishingly realistic, but each takes its proper place within the visual unity of the picture. Head and figure are rendered with an understanding of the underlying anatomical structure, while the topography of lines, wrinkles, and bulges describe a face that was uniquely Madame David’s. An intense concern for the properties of material things on the part of French painters resulted in an emphasis upon the individuality of the sitter. The qualities found in David’s work and portraits by other French artists could be readily observed by Rembrandt. In particular ways, they contrasted with certain aspects of the American tradition in which he was schooled.

Charles Willson Peale’s charming portrait of Mrs. James Smith and Her Grandson (Fig. 35) suggests some of these differences. The tender relationship of woman and child is expressed by their poses. An intimacy seems to exist too, between the portrait subjects and the viewer, a familiarity that no doubt was also felt by the artist. Intimacy is a sentiment frequently found in the elder Peale’s portraits but rarely in the French, where more typically the objective eye of the painter examined face, garments, and furnishings in the same detached manner. Perhaps as the result of this intimacy with the sitters, Peale concentrated on their faces rather than their figures as complete forms, and as a result of this emphasis, the faces were not well integrated into the composition. Painted in virtually one value and in high contrast to the background, the subjects’ faces were not anchored to the figures and instead push forward to the picture plane. No depth of color was suggested by the oil pigment that lies essentially on the surface of the canvas. Judging by many of his portraits, Charles
Willson Peale often used a schematic approach to depict his sitters. Basing the faces on an oval with eyes placed on a line at a halfway point and depicting a narrow nose, he tended to produce a familial resemblance among his subjects rather than a sense of their particularity. Along with other American artists, Charles Willson Peale was much affected by the British tradition of portraiture, which served to confirm the tendency to emphasize the surface of the picture, both in the technique of applying pigment and in the concentration on surface patterns, as opposed to the French approach of creating three-dimensional forms in space.

As a member of a younger generation, Rembrandt Peale tended towards certain departures from his father’s works. The nature of those departures made him a prime candidate for casting his lot with the French. He took delight in suggesting the solidity of forms in space and, unlike Charles Willson, emphasized the distinctions of individuals. These characteristics are apparent as early as his 1797 portrait of the Baltimore merchant, William Raborg, who was depicted by Rembrandt with face and features that are his and his alone. Rembrandt’s innate tendencies served as a sympathetic base for exploring principles of painting in Paris. Effects of his learning experiences there are especially evident in the portraits he painted during the first decade after his return.

Hanging in a gallery in the National Museum of American Art, Rembrandt’s portrait of Edward Shippen Burd (Fig. 36) stands out, even to a naïve eye, as obviously different from its neighbors, portraits by Rembrandt’s contemporaries, Jacob Eicholtz, Asher B. Durand, Henry Inman, Gilbert Stuart, Emanuel Leutze. Mr. Burd’s head and figure unquestionably displace space; a range of values molds his features with anatomical credibility. Both the direction and the color of light are consistent throughout the picture, with warm flesh tones repeated in the background, one of the ways in which the picture is unified through color. Rembrandt’s colors have depth, and his use of pigment expresses a sensuous richness. The act of painting here was not merely empirical but intellectual as well. It involved a thinking through of principles, adding a dimension of thought to the creation of the work and serving also to add to a sense of conscious awareness in the subject.

Paintings of Jacob Koch and Jane Griffith Koch relate closely to the Burd portrait, the latter illustrated here (Fig. 29). Though ren-
dered with minute attention to details and textures, the painting remains visually unified. The intense reality of the image conveys too a sense of character: Jane Koch's facial features, figure and pose are suggestive of her response to life, of a preoccupation with melancholy or suppressed sorrow. Other portraits from the years after his return from Paris, from 1808 and into the 1820s, typically show these qualities of dimensionality, depth of color, and convincing portrayals of unique individuals.

In the early 1820s Rembrandt Peale became engrossed in a portrait subject that crossed the bounds into history painting, the image of George Washington. His first Washington portrait, done from life in 1795 when the artist was only seventeen, showed a precocious ability to grasp reality. Now he hoped to create an image of the nation's first president so true to life and so appropriate to historical role that it would become a national standard. Certain Parisian experiences relate to these efforts.

Rembrandt owned autographs of both Washington and Napoleon, indicating the personal interest he took in both historic figures. Living in Paris at the height of Napoleon's power, he had depicted the famous face and, the year after returning to the United States, painted a full-sized equestrian Napoleon (now lost) which John Neal had called, "a vigorous picture . . . the greatest of his workmanship." Rembrandt's memories of the Emperor and of the many French paintings which met the demand for his image must have fed his determination to exploit the need for images of Washington in his own country.

French portrayals of Napoleon in the midst of his campaigns differ considerably from traditional military paintings. In Jean Antoine Gros's The Battle of Eylau (in the Louvre), for example, instead of being shown as a powerful conqueror triumphantly vanquishing the foe, Bonaparte, surrounded by the carnage of battle, is enveloped in tranquility. The dying soldiers, French and foes alike, in their last glimpse of this world gratefully raise their eyes to behold a saviour of mankind. In pose and gesture, the image of Napoleon is immutable. He has already attained the permanence of the ages while all of those

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9 Harold Edward Dickson, ed., Observations on American Art: Selections from the Writings of John Neal (1793-1876), (State College, 1943), 18.
around him continue to be afflicted by the transiency of life that besets ordinary mortals.

Rembrandt concentrated all of his energy into efforts to create the singular, definitive portrait of Washington as he envisioned it. In 1823, after more than a dozen attempts, he “determined to make a last effort, and in an excitement even beyond the ‘poetic frenzy,’ . . . succeeded.”\(^\text{10}\) He had created his *Patriae Pater* (Fig. 12) which, in his eyes, combined the best features from several depictions of Washington: his own 1795 work, a portrait by Charles Willson Peale, Houdon’s sculpture, and other life portraits. The image was unlike any other in the long procession of Washington subjects. Against the infinite space of sky, the bust of Washington appears in a timeless realm, set apart from the viewer’s space by a stone wall of solidity and density that suggests the immutability of this man and his attainments. A carved wreath of oak leaves and antique head, shaped by human hands and recalling architectural decorations of the past, refers to the immortality of human history. Though Rembrandt did not originate the idea of surrounding a portrait with an architectural frame, he adapted it for superb dramatic effect.\(^\text{11}\) This device, enhanced by the cape that seems to spill over into the viewer’s own space, creates a spatial illusion for the physical presence of Washington and, at the same time, places Washington in a changeless world, at a spiritual distance from the viewer.

Rembrandt did at least seventy-nine repetitions of his ultimate Washington portrait (Fig. 13 is one), proving the basic strength of the image and its broad popular appeal.\(^\text{12}\) His use of the same “porthole” format for a painting of Martha Washington makes it clear that, in the portrait of the father of our country, the setting is meant to refer to eternity. By contrast, Martha is depicted on the other side of a wall in cozy domesticity, sitting in a chair in front of a window that looks out upon a view which is definitely of this world.


\(^{11}\) Marc H. Miller, “Lafayette’s Farewell Tour of America, 1824-25; A Study of the Pageantry and Public Portraiture,” Ph.D. diss. (New York University, 1979), 238, mentions other instances of this device in American portraiture and refers to its long European tradition.

In the next year, 1824, the artist exhibited *Washington Before Yorktown*, a monumental equestrian painting (Fig. 7). With his head turned to his right and his arm extended in a gesture of command, Washington appears firmly in control of the situation; the movement of his form is balanced by the pose of his horse. Even with this suggestion of momentary action, however, Rembrandt has curiously taken him out of time. The General is represented, not at the age of forty-nine as he was at Yorktown, but as he appeared towards the end of his life—specifically, as he appears in Rembrandt’s porthole portrait. His head is surrounded by the light of the heavens, while his officers, Lafayette, Henry Knox, and Benjamin Lincoln on the left, Rochambeaux on the right, are situated in the earthly realm, surrounded by green foliage. Inconsistently, they appear as the age they actually were at Yorktown. Washington is shown from the viewer’s vantage point in time as already having attained immortality in the eyes of his countrymen—similar to the manner in which Napoleon insisted on being portrayed by artists of the Empire. A meticulously painted green plant interjects itself in the foreground, healthy and strong and about to flower, even as the nation itself was at this moment, and, as a result of this battle, about to burst into bloom, securely planted in the land of the new world. Considering Rembrandt’s interest in natural science, there can be no doubt but that this plant, so prominently placed, was intended to have meaning in the Washington painting. It is a mullein, native to Europe (also the origin of the colonies) and flourishes as a wild flower in North America.  

Rembrandt’s “porthole” portraits and his equestrian Washington are history paintings in the sense that they interpret the past with meaning for the present. While in Paris Rembrandt could develop an interest in the painting of historical and literary subjects since such works were the glory of the modern French school. He was earlier turned in that direction by Benjamin West, who had admonished him during his stay in London not to spend all of his time on portraits.

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As if to demonstrate the rewards of this higher branch of art, his compatriot John Vanderlyn, at the Paris Salon of 1808, received a medal for his painting of Marius Amidst the Ruins of Carthage, a solemn theme taken from Roman history. Such an honor would not have been given for a mere portrait.

During the months of 1809 and 1810 while Rembrandt was in Paris, Vanderlyn was making drawings and water-color sketches for a composition of Ariadne which he planned to show at the next Salon. He invited Rembrandt to work with him from the model who posed for Ariadne. Modesty was not a problem for young Peale, either in drawing room nude models or in displaying paintings of nude subjects, another way in which he differed from his father who was less tolerant about such matters. No known drawings exist from Rembrandt's study of Vanderlyn's model.

Female subjects from literature and history were popular in Parisian painting during the Empire; indeed, the trend in figure painting was toward feminine softness in place of the severe masculinity of David's Republican paintings. Among those subjects shown at the Salons of 1808, 1810, and 1812 were Zenobia, Leda, Joan of Arc, the Roman Daughter, and Atala, as well as Ariadne. The beauty and expressive possibilities of these feminine themes were not lost on Rembrandt, and in the first years after his return from Paris, he worked on themes from literature that involved the female figure. In his museum in Baltimore he exhibited his paintings and such subjects by other artists, the Musidora, by Benjamin West, and Ariadne by Vanderlyn, among other works. His own paintings included a female figure called The Dream of Love which, he said, was intended "to display the beauty, softness, symmetry and grace of the female form." A life-sized painting based on a French engraving, it was, Rembrandt insisted, "varied and finished from Nature." Of his works in this category only The Roman Daughter, painted in 1812, is extant (Fig. 37).

The story of the Roman daughter derives from a tale in Roman

14 Rembrandt describes this experience in "Reminiscences," The Crayon I (May, 1855), 290.
16 Rembrandt Peale, "Reminiscences," The Crayon II (October, 1855), 207.
literature of the first century, B.C., which was in turn based on an even more ancient legend. A political prisoner, Cimonus, condemned to death by starvation, was kept alive by his daughter, Pero (called in some versions, Xantippe), who visited her father in prison and surreptitiously nourished him with milk from her breasts. Eventually prison guards discovered the forbidden act of sustenance, but authorities were so moved by this creative act of filial love that they pardoned Cimonus and released him from prison. A life-and-death drama that is simultaneously virtuous and erotic, this scene of a daughter's devotion to her father attracted many painters from the time of the Renaissance. Rembrandt was enormously impressed with the first version of the subject he ever saw—and no wonder, for it was painted by Peter Paul Rubens. As part of the Steir collection, the Rubens painting was located in Annapolis about 1799 when seen by Rembrandt. Recalling that experience, Rembrandt quoted Joshua Reynolds's comments on the picture as being in Rubens's "very best manner. The woman who is suckling her father [Reynolds continued] is one of his most beautiful heads, and it has likewise a great expression."

Referring to his own painting, Rembrandt disclosed that the subject had been very personal to him. "This picture was painted con amore," he said, "and was not intended for sale." Perhaps he felt that in some essential way, his own daughters had given him the needed strength for his professional life. Whatever the reason, he did not further explain his personal motivation for having taken up the subject.

In Rembrandt's monumental painting (it measures 104 inches by 82 inches), the two characters appear as if they were actors on a stage. Body gestures and facial expressions of father and daughter, along with details of the setting—Cimonus's leg irons and chains, prison walls of heavy stones, the hostile darkness beyond the arched doorway—add to the understanding of the drama as it unfolds before the viewer. In addition, the visual forms—heads, feet, the bench, outstretched arms—appear and relate with utmost clarity, for the struc-

17 Rembrandt Peale, "Reminiscences," The Crayon II (September, 1855), 175.
18 Rembrandt Peale to Mr. Pierpont, New York, August 7, 1823, Pierpont Morgan Library Papers, Microfilm Roll Number N 68-12 in the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
ture of the composition is based on mathematical proportions. (The relation of the width of the picture to its height is a basic unit of measurement, for example, and furnishes the vertical dimension of the figure group and determines other proportions within the picture.) The artist has clearly placed his figures within ordered relationships in accordance with French academic theory that defined art as being based on reason, subject to rules and principles.

As was typical of French modern painting as perfected by David, human figures, enhanced by an appropriate setting and conveying physical and psychological relationships that are absolutely clear, carry the weight of expressive meaning. However, Rembrandt’s painting also differs significantly from the classic style of David’s late eighteenth-century works, for the moment of the story the American artist chose to portray is one of unresolved tension, and its future consequences are not at all certain. Both father and daughter look off into the distance. Are they being watched? Will they be discovered? Does this act represent their initial venture, or their last? 

Rembrandt dramatized the possibility of their discovery by the unseen guards and, at the same time, he compounded the tension for the viewer by clouding the erotic nature of the act with suspense. Cimonus does not yet touch his daughter, he does not even look at her, and she has not yet uncovered her breast. Seemingly, the modesty of the pose diminishes the sensuality of the act. But what will happen between these two in the next moment? Rembrandt increased the potential for eroticism by letting the viewer’s imagination take over where he left off.

With its deliberate lack of resolution, The Roman Daughter does not belong to the era of David’s classic works but rather to the later generation of David’s pupils and beyond. In David’s memorable works of the 1780s and 1790s, as in his Brutus, for example, the climax of a scene is shown and the entire meaning of the action is related within the framework of the picture. Each figure in some way responds

to the central theme, and the movement of the composition is from
the outside edges towards the center. In Rembrandt's composition,
on the other hand, the action of the two figures extends beyond the
picture—the moment is unresolved; subsequent action is unknown.
David's work represents a climax, the final act, the last resounding
clash of cymbals, while Rembrandt's is the scene that carries us into
the next act, the leading tone that moves us into the next phrase. It
is incomplete in itself, and its purposeful tension involves the viewer
in the action and mood of the painting.

Towards the end of the decade after his return from Paris, Rem-
brandt began another literary painting with a sensational subject:
Death. Completed in 1820, his picture was inspired by a poem, "The
Court of Death," written by an Englishman, Beilby Porteus, who
intoned a solemn scene:

Deep in a murky cave's recess,
Laved by Oblivion's listless stream,
. . . . the Monarch sits
In unsubstantial majesty.\(^{20}\)

The theme of Death as the common end of all human beings gave
Rembrandt the opportunity to display his skill in figure painting, for
he placed in his composition twenty-three figures, larger than life
(the canvas measures 24 feet wide and 13 feet high), representing
all ages of humanity and every emotion (Fig. 6). He was convinced
that such a subject had a strong moral basis and would have a broad
popular appeal—and he was right, for during thirteen months as a
traveling exhibition, the painting produced receipts close to $9,000
and cleared a profit to Rembrandt of about $4,000.\(^{21}\) His Court of
Death closely followed Beilby's dark poetic image.

\(^{20}\) Quotations from Porteus' poem and from the circular printed for the exhibition of
Rembrandt's painting are in the Collections of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania,
Microfilm Roll Number P 22 in the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
John Neal's description of first seeing the painting was published in the Boston Daily Evening
Transcript (November 14, 1868), 1, cols. 3 & 4. I am grateful to Merl M. Moore, Jr., for
bringing this article to my attention. Rembrandt's own description of his painting is related
in "The Court of Death. Notes and Queries." The Crayon IV (September, 1857), 278-279.

\(^{21}\) Rembrandt Peale to Rev. W. Pierpont, Boston, April 13, 1845; Pierpont Morgan
Library Papers, Microfilm Roll Number 68-12, Archives of America Art, Smithsonian
Institution.
Death is shown as a corpse at the center of the picture. With his head and feet touching the waters of oblivion (signifying the mysteries of the origin and end of life), he serves as a footstool for the figure above him—the Power of Death, shrouded in heavy drapery with only the face visible within the shadow of a cowl. Characters on either side of this central pair represent temptations of life and evil forces which accompany death: at the left, Indulgence, Intemperance, Suicide, Remorse, and Frenzy tantalize mortals and writhe in agony; on the right, Ambition, Revenge, Famine, Pestilence, and Conflagration relentlessly torment human existence. A warrior striding forth after false glory terrifies a widowed mother with her babe (who was drawn after Rembrandt’s youngest child). Two figures in the right foreground echo the Roman Daughter theme, an old man who, appropriately enough, represents Old Age, and a young woman, Filial Piety, who tenderly holds him in her arms. This image, which must have been very meaningful to Rembrandt, was made more personal by his models; his father posed for the white-haired, bent figure, and one of his daughters for the compassionate maiden.

The artist developed his composition by drawing the figures from posed models, a basic practice in Parisian studios. Even the corpse was drawn from a model, a medical school cadaver. Rembrandt’s dependence upon nature is apparent, in the line of the hip and breast of the young woman lying on the ground, for example, which is obviously observed from life. Rembrandt wrote of his confidence in this approach to art when he discussed his method of instructing students: “I have recommended these young geniuses not to draw anything out of their own heads, until they should learn to draw everything before their eyes, with accuracy and facility, if they were determined to learn.”

In addition to being based on nature, the figures in The Court of Death are also based on art. Poses of the striding warrior and the infant leaning towards his mother, the form of the frenzied Conflagration at the extreme right edge of the painting and of other characters are closely related to works of art—to ancient sculpture, baroque painting, and modern French painting. Rembrandt was recalling

images from the fund he had gathered during his tours of the Napoleonic gallery and from his study of recent works of the French school. He could readily observe that modern French paintings often referred to well-known works of the past in the way figures were posed, or in the relationship of figures within a composition. Indeed, one of the lessons to be learned in Paris was the importance of this relationship of past art to present. In “quoting” certain earlier works, he hoped to place his own work more securely within the immortal realm of great art.

Though some of the individual figures in his enormous painting have merit, *The Court of Death* does not hold together as a composition. No single event or visual form unifies the long horizontal painting, which the viewer must see by going from one figure to the next, as if each separate figure were an actor who appears on stage at a certain moment in a drama. The cast of characters relates to the idea of death rather than to each other and they are meant, as it were, to speak one at a time to the viewer.

The main problem with the work, however, is that the scene of *The Court of Death* is imaginary, and Rembrandt’s strength in painting was to depict the real world before his eyes, not things out of his head—in the manner that he had admonished young artists to practice. He was not able to soar above earthbound mortals to a realm of the spirit. Consequently his dramatic image really depicts his models posing rather than awe-inspiring images of good and evil, life and death—the powerful forces that he meant to convey. Because the picture involves the viewer directly and is incomplete without viewer response, it is beyond the principles of classic painting in the Davidian sense. Like *The Roman Daughter*, *The Court of Death* is more properly related to the sensibilities of Romantic art and literature.

Rembrandt painted other subjects from literature, including *The Ascent of Elijah*, *The Death of Virginia*, and *Lyseppa*, but all have been lost and are known only as titles.

Besides learning about French theory and practice in painting, the American in Paris was also able to observe attitudes of the Parisian public towards art, to see how artists related to learned men of science and literature, and to assess policies of the government towards artists.

At the Salon exhibitions, held in the Louvre every two years during the Empire, the Parisian public could see the most recent paintings,
sculptures, and prints by contemporary artists. These events attracted enormous crowds that represented the entire gamut of the population, from the fashionable and wealthy to the street people of Paris. Some came to admire and applaud, others to laugh and jeer, but indifference was not on the agenda. Rembrandt almost entered the Salon exhibitions on both his first and second visits, but each time he stopped just short of doing so. In the first instance, he left about a month before the Salon of 1808 opened—even though he had talked of sending portraits there, and on the second trip in 1810, he again left the continent just before the Salon exhibition was installed in the Louvre galleries. With his connections to officials in the Parisian art community, Rembrandt would have been a shoo-in past the jury of selection. At any rate, neither time did he choose to prolong his stay and enter—but he was well aware of the importance of these exhibitions to artists and their public, and to the sense they created of a French national school.

Rembrandt thrilled to see the equality French artists enjoyed with the most famous savants of the nation at the National Institute of France, an organization founded under the Republic to replace the banished royal academies with divisions representing the Arts, Sciences, and Letters. "It really was a glorious sight," he wrote his wife Eleanor after attending an award ceremony at the Institute honoring young artists, musicians, and writers, "in so splendid a Hall, amidst so elegant a company, and from the hands of the Minister of Education to see the young men receive their Crowns of Flowers, Medals and Prize-books, accompanied by the applauses of the whole company." Just before leaving Paris in September of 1810, he attended a meeting of the Class of Sciences at the Institute and presented an encaustic painting as an example of a new technique he had developed. The scientists accepted the painting and resolved to discuss innovations

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of the technique with members of the Class of Fine Arts. Men of science and art were respectful of each other's expertise and practiced the sharing of knowledge. (Evidently Rembrandt's innovations in the technique were not considered significant; he is not mentioned in subsequent publications on encaustics.)

Rembrandt also attended in 1810 the award ceremony for Decennial prizes at the National Institute when the imperial government gave cash awards for outstanding achievements over the preceding ten years in science, letters, and art. Ten prizes were offered in the category of painting along with prizes of 5,000 to 100,000 francs. It was indeed astonishing to an American to see that France honored her artists not only with praise but also with money—ultimately, the most impressive kind of public honor. In the United States, art was considered superfluous to the practical necessities of national life; in France, art was a force for the prestige of the nation in international affairs and an educational focus for citizens. Accordingly, France promoted excellence in her artists by subsidizing their education, encouraging patronage and competition through regular exhibitions, and by opening the great national collections in the Louvre to artists for study, as also to the general public for edification and enjoyment.

After Rembrandt returned from Paris, "he was haunted day and night, by the magnificent spectres of Genius," wrote John Neal. In the flush of his Parisian experiences, he created the finest paintings of his career. Although he was praised by Neal and others, the more general acclamation and patronage which he sought did not materialize. In the art world of Paris he had witnessed avid public interest in art, patronage by the government, official honors for artists. In his own country, he found these conditions largely supplanted by an indifferent public and uncertain patronage—alas, no cash awards, no medals, no crowns of flowers.

His first disappointment was a crushing blow from which he never fully recovered. When he proudly exhibited The Roman Daughter at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, he was

malign by the Russian Vice-Consul in the United States, Paul Svinin, who asserted that the painting was merely a copy of a work by François Gérard. Though the wounded artist, with the help of Thomas Sully, managed to get a retraction of the false accusation, his reputation retained a fraudulent tinge.27

Taking the scorned work to Baltimore, Rembrandt established a museum with his brother Rubens and painted portraits for private patrons and for the city of Baltimore. Here he created his Court of Death. Heartened by the popular acceptance of the massive canvas when it was sent on tour, he began a second painting of the same size, Christ’s Sermon on the Mount, another subject which would allow him to depict many kinds of people expressing a wide range of emotions. “But the difficulties of exhibition,” he later recalled, “disturbed my tranquility, and I abandoned the enterprise.”28 An ambitious project, eagerly begun, was left unfinished in the face of practical difficulties. The lack of encouragement from a professional community or concerned public was soon to extinguish even the beginnings of creative endeavors.

Moving on to New York City, Rembrandt continued to paint portraits with some success, but patronage never seemed to come up to his expectations. In 1825 he followed John Trumbull as president of the American Academy of Fine Arts, and he also became a founding member of the National Academy of Design. In lending support to artists’ organizations, he was following a Peale tradition, for his father had given early and strong encouragement to such institutions in Philadelphia. Surely the benefits of artists’ communities had been confirmed for Rembrandt in Paris.

Working for a time in Boston, he became one of the first American artists to undertake the new medium of lithography. Though he used the printmaking process primarily to copy paintings rather than to create original subjects, it brought out the best in his technical skill. The historian of American lithographs, Harry T. Peters, judged Rembrandt’s print based on his 1823 portrait of Washington as “per-

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27 For further information, see Wilbur H. Hunter, “A Rediscovery: The Roman Daughter by Rembrandt Peale,” Antiques CII, 6 (December, 1972), 1073 ff.
haps . . . the greatest American lithograph." Rembrandt’s ventures in lithography were indirectly associated with Paris: John Pendleton of the Boston firm that printed his designs had first become interested in this medium in Paris.

Rembrandt’s deepest disappointment as an American artist may well have been his failure to obtain a commission from the federal government—in spite of the fact that he had committed himself to the nation’s history with a great deal of time and effort on his Washington subjects. Although his *Washington Before Yorktown* hung in the Capitol in 1825, it did not inspire Congress towards purchase or a commission.

In 1828 at the age of fifty, Rembrandt Peale painted a self-portrait (Fig. 38) in which he seems to look squarely at himself—measuring, perhaps his accomplishments of the past, and encountering his failed ambitions. His most original work was behind him. Repetition had begun to replace invention in his painting, and copying substituted for the sensuous joy of painting that he had once known. From now on, he would continue to paint portraits, but would spend much of his time repeating his earlier works and making copies of old master paintings. His unbounded sense of confidence in his own ability, so boldly asserted since youth, now began to sound pathetic. On a trip to Italy later that year, he wrote from Florence, “I am just finishing a copy of the most admired Picture in the world, the Madonna Sediolla by Raphael. . . . The copy I am making promised to be the most beautiful that ever was made.”

When he returned once more to Paris after his tour of Italy, he wrote his wife, “I have now got out of the regions of the dead, in

31 Francis V. O’Connor theorizes that self-portraits which are completely frontal often disclose the artist confronting himself, and associates a number of such works with professional or personal crises or changes in the lives of their authors. See his article, “The Psychodynamics of the Frontal Self-Portrait,” *Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Art*, 1 (Hillsdale, New Jersey, 1985).
Italy, and am in the land of the living.” Throughout the nineteenth century, American artists referred to Italy as the land of the dead—that is, of art of the past, and to Paris as the land of the living—of contemporary art. Could Rembrandt have believed, have hoped, that America might represent the land of the future for art? Surely, with his basic optimism, Rembrandt Peale must have kept faith with the future of the artists in his own country, even though he could not attain his vision for himself as an artist in America—a vision that was shaped by his experiences in Paris.

*National Museum of American Art*  

*Lois Marie Fink*