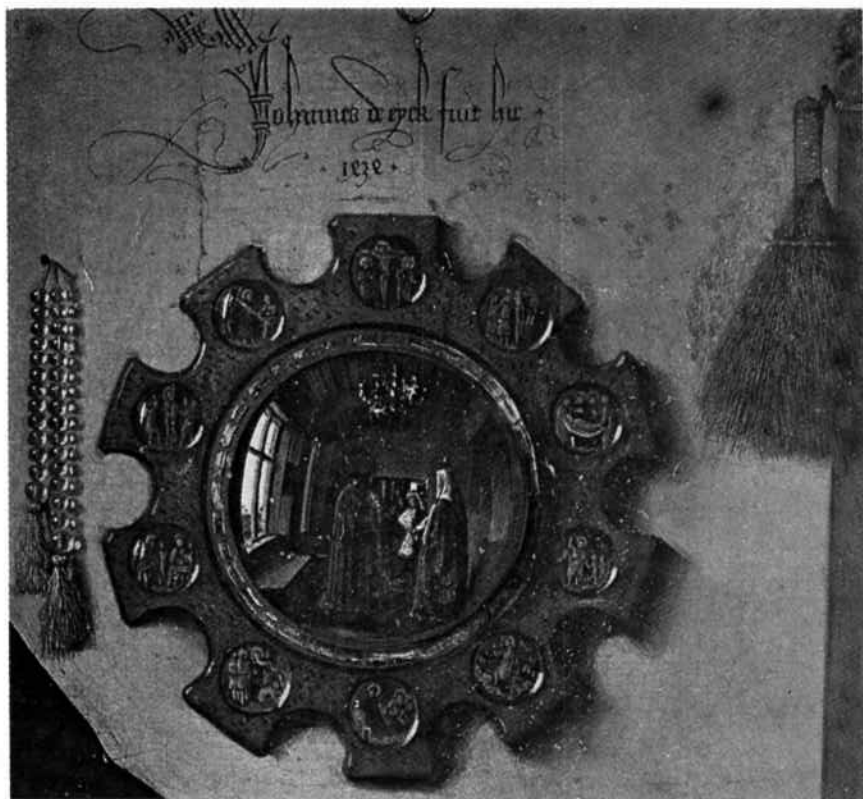


Iris

notes in the history of art

december 1983



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The Cologne Self-Portrait (Br.61)

All three paintings in which Rembrandt poses as a painter date from his last decade. In the Kenwood painting (Br. 52) he holds his maulstick, brushes and palette. In the Louvre (Br. 53) he grasps all of these and stands behind a painting on an easel. In the Cologne *Self-Portrait* he holds only a maulstick and stands in front of a painting (fig. 3). Its faint edge is so subtle or faded that many viewers fail to recognize this as a painting within a painting. In fact this assertion must be accepted on faith by those who see it only through reproductions rather than where it hangs within the shadow of the great Cologne Cathedral. The obscure profile of the dark intruder in the upper left contributes to the painting's mystery, thus to its extensive art history.

The exact date of Br. 61 is unknown, but it was painted after 1661, the date of *The Conspiracy of Claudius Civilius*. (fig. 4) The *Self-Portrait* could be conceived only after the completion of the eleven conspirators. Indeed the four on the right, their heads outlined with the sculptural brevity of worn coins, almost serve as studies for the *Self-Portrait*. The two works share a common history: both are fragments. The *Self-Portrait's* vague background figure is cropped in half: the painting was trimmed on its left side. Similarly, the maulstick does not connect with the hand that holds it: it was cut along the bottom.

In the *Conspiracy* the table top is the source of illumination and the conspirators materialize from its light. In the self-portrait, Rembrandt is the light source who materializes from his night. Before he was forced to clip its wings, when it could still soar, the *Conspiracy* displayed a stairway leading up to the table. In the self-portrait, Rembrandt resorts neither to a table for illumination nor to steps for elevation. He climbs into the future unsupported by fallen scaffolds of the past. Civilius' story is of rebellion

against the repression of rulers, the self-portrait's of defiance against the tyranny of time. Here light and matter, time and space, are one.

Whether Rembrandt's collar and turban merely reflect light or shine independently is undiscernible. Light clearly emanates, however, from his laughing face. The eyes of the young generate much heat but little light; in the eyes of the aged pure light shines as from distant stars. Here Rembrandt's is the light of the sun at noon reflected off the moon at midnight.

The mantle and medallion he wears are characteristic of his youthful poses in the glorious armor of soldiers or the luxurious attire of aristocrats. Another almost adolescent disguise that enhanced his groping for maturity is the moustache, which he grew as soon as he was able. Here, however, he is clean-shaven. He now is so old that not much else except the decay of death could make him appear any older. While in his youth he found models in the aged faces of others, now he faces the furrows carved upon his own forehead by an indefatigable past.

This old man is smiling, indeed laughing. An old man, nearly dying. Dying, and yet laughing. He seldom has laughed for us before. Only two other self-portrait paintings bear witness to his humorous moments, perhaps because the completion of a painting requires a very long moment indeed. The joke must be very good to sustain his laughter very long. He laughs in the Dresden Br. 30 with a smiling Saskia on his lap and a beguiling beer in his hand. And seven or eight years earlier he laughs in the Rijksmuseum Br. 5. Dresden's smiles of the concupiscent couple in a public place are like the two opposing Elgin masks superimposed upon a single face. Although not false, their smiles are forced. But the smile of the Rijksmuseum's companionless younger man is unobserved and therefore less reserved.

The Rijksmuseum Br. 5 (fig. 5) stands unique among its predecessors. Rembrandt's body turns to the right as in most of his painting self-portraits. But here, with an abrupt baroque twist, for the first of few times his face looks to the left. With light and shade delineated sharply from forehead down to chin, the features and contours clearly predict by nearly 40 years the Cologne self-portrait. The resemblance is so forthright that Rembrandt must have modeled one upon the other.

Just as a photographer would hesitate to exhibit a family album, Rembrandt may have discouraged the sale of any of his self-portraits. Except for the gifts to family or friends, the majority of the markers of his journey from the past must have remained with him in the present so that through them he could deduce his future. We might also suspect that later when his insolvent estate was auctioned he could have retained the self-portraits as personal possessions like so much dirty laundry of value to no one else, or as studio equipment, like mirrors essential to his work. Ten years later in the post-mortem inventory of the contents of Rembrandt's rented rooms, among the fifty items listed were only one Bible but two mirrors. As smoke to fire, in Rembrandt's world of shadow and reflection

where there are mirrors there are self-portraits. Whether or not Rembrandt possessed Br. 5 to model Br. 61 upon it may be irrelevant. The adagio of Mozart's K. 16 Symphony, his first, makes an involuntary reappearance as the "cantus firmus" in the finale of the Jupiter Symphony, his last; the same subconscious transformation could be ascribed to Rembrandt.

The origin of the background figure in the upper left is equally concatenated. It is a painting within a painting, a self-portrait within a self-portrait. A dozen times during Rembrandt's last fifteen years, the self-portraits depict the light shining from the left, the body turning to the right, and the head facing forward. While the foreground figure of Br. 61 deviates from this formula, the background figure adheres to it. And just as the foreground figure reinterprets a youthful self-portrait, the background figure repeats in shadow the profile of the senior self-portraits. The nose is somewhat hooked, yet the chin is unmistakably Rembrandt's. Comparisons with other late self-portraits attest to this resemblance, but nowhere is it more marked than in the London Kenwood House Br. 52.

Br. 61 is not merely an artwork; it is a testament. As a double self-portrait, the old man recedes into the darkness simultaneously as his youth emerges into the light. A medieval tale tells of a spring water so sweet that it made the tongue eloquent, the head wise, and the body young, yet its source sprang from a decaying dead dog. Life is cyclic in the same way the earth is round. Thus travelers along a straight path end exactly where they began. The East relates this to the law of reincarnation, the West to the doctrine of the Eternal Return. Although his future has ended, Rembrandt's past has just begun.

And so he laughs. At what does he laugh? At himself? At the world? At life? At death? He has lost his wealth, his reputation, his collection, his house, Saskia his wife, Hendrickje his lover, all but one of his children — and still he laughs. In 1664, when he may have been painting this self-portrait, one-sixth of Amsterdam died in a plague — and nevertheless he laughs. Death is not a tragedy, but death is not a joke. Life is a joke, and death its laughter.

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fig. 3. Rembrandt Self Portrait, after 1661, Wallraf Richartz Museum, Cologne.



fig. 5. Rembrandt Self Portrait, 1620, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



fig. 4. Rembrandt The Conspiracy of Claudius Civilis, 1661, National Museum, Stockholm.