

The Wall Street Journal
June 18-19, 2016

Masterpiece

Judas Returning the Thirty Pieces of Silver (1629), by Rembrandt

Picturing a Sinner's Remorse



Compared with his earlier work, it's more nuanced, understated and relaxed, yet also more dramatic and enigmatic. Photo: Photography courtesy of The National Gallery, London, 2016.

by Lance Esplund

One of the most arresting aspects of Rembrandt van Rijn's miraculous oil-on-panel "Judas Returning the Thirty Pieces of Silver" (1629)—besides its entrancing, burnished-bronze light—is the seated priest's dismissive hand, which shuns the kneeling Judas Iscariot. The oil painting, in a British private collection, is on view at New York's Morgan Library & Museum through Sept. 18. It is the single painting and the starring work in "Rembrandt's First Masterpiece," a show comprising 44 artworks, mostly works on paper by Rembrandt. A boutique exhibition, it includes some of the Dutch master's major religious prints, astonishing self-portraits and, reunited here with the painting for the first time, five preparatory drawings for "Judas," which has never been shown before in the U.S.

Roughly 31 inches high by 40 inches wide, "Judas" was completed when Rembrandt was just 23 years old. His 24th extant oil painting, it marks a sea change—perhaps the birth of Rembrandt the romantic. Rembrandt's earlier paintings, though certainly beautiful and accomplished, were generally more theatrical. In Rembrandt's "History Painting" (1626), forms appear to occupy separate spaces; figures verge on caricature; and, as in the works of Caravaggio, light feels artificial, as if stage-lit. Although Rembrandt never traveled outside his native Netherlands (he believed anything truly important in art would come to him—and it did), his early pictures show the influence of Raphael and the Italian baroque—followed, in later works, by that of Giorgione, Leonardo and Titian.

"Judas" represents the biblical story of Judas's return to the Jewish Temple after he has betrayed and condemned Christ with a kiss. Spurned by the priests who hired him, the remorseful Judas throws his blood money on the floor and, later, hangs himself in a field.

Compared with "History Painting," "Judas" is more nuanced, understated and relaxed, yet also more dramatic and enigmatic—more Rembrandtesque. Despite the artwork's title, however, Rembrandt does not emphasize the strewn silver coins, which are illuminated in a pool of golden light and can be easily counted. Instead, he explores his characters' emotional states and interrelationships, without resorting to melodrama.

Rembrandt establishes a united front among the Temple priests, especially through that large, outstretched hand, which signals us to stop and look. What we see is a Temple interior with a repentant Judas and a cluster of startled, bug-eyed priests who block the apostle like a team of defensive linemen. Engaging us eye-to-eye, they look ashamed—as if they had been caught red-handed.

Judas, wracked with despair, is seen here bleeding—having pulled out his hair by the roots and having too tightly clenched his hands in supplication and prayer. He is contorted and trembling—the crown of his head seemingly compressed by the force of the priest's out-scaled hand, which strains toward but doesn't touch Judas's inclined head.

With somebody as inventive and metaphorically rich as Rembrandt, however, it is essential to pay attention to how he tells a story. Caiaphas is traditionally depicted as the priest who dismisses Judas's entreaty. Here, however, Caiaphas is probably the central, tall figure standing directly behind the seated priest; but the gesture still seems to emanate from him. The seated priest's head, wrapped in glistening blue-and-gold fabric, is positioned as much in front of as it is seemingly lodged within Caiaphas's chest—as if the two priests shared head, heart and hand.

Rembrandt underscores the fact that, despite the priests' conjoined efforts, the old Temple, built on sacrifice, will soon be replaced with the new. The Temple's column appears to dissolve. And flanking the priests is a large religious book—the painting's primary light source. The book's Hebrew text translates into "mesh of branches for evil," which refers to the Old Testament story of Absalom, an ideal counterpart to the story of Judas. Absalom betrayed his father, David, and was murdered after he collided with and was caught in the branches of an oak tree. Rembrandt presses the book against the row of priests, as if it were the first to collapse in a series of toppling dominoes. But the penitent Judas, at the end of the line, doesn't fall.

In "Judas," Rembrandt masterfully tells a story. He believably conveys the various qualities of velvet, stone, silk and flesh. He creates palpable space, weight and air, and he orchestrates a full range of psychological temperament, emotion and light. And also, perhaps for the first time in a Rembrandt painting, he bathes everything in mystery. Light, no longer merely another player, is from now on Rembrandt's chief protagonist, illuminating a world that—regardless of subject—combines plain-spoken narrative with spiritual revelation, reality with dream.

Many of us have already experienced the miracle that is Rembrandt. His first masterpiece lets us see where it all began.

—*Mr. Esplund writes about art for the Journal.*

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