

Amy Golahny: Rembrandt's reading. The Artist's Bookshelf of Ancient Poetry and History, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2003, 283 S., 64 Abb., ISBN 9-05356-609-0, EUR 39,50

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According to the inventory taken at the time of his bankruptcy (1656), Rembrandt's extensive collection of art, artifacts and naturalia included only twenty-two books. A few of these are specifically described in the document, such as "an old Bible", Dürer's book on proportion, and an edition of Flavius Josephus illustrated by Tobias Stimmer, but the identification of fifteen volumes remains open to speculation. Working from the inventory and from visual hints in paintings, drawings and etchings by Rembrandt and his workshop, Amy Golahny sets herself the task of establishing what Rembrandt read. By analyzing details of costume and action in various historical scenes, she deduces which editions of certain publications Rembrandt studied most closely and therefore presumably owned, and how he drew upon them to add accuracy, vivacity and emotion to his compositions. Golahny does not attempt a comprehensive assessment of Rembrandt's approach to antique themes, but sticks to specific instances in which close correspondences between an image and an identifiable narrative text can be demonstrated. For example, she does not cover the broad range of Rembrandt's Biblical imagery, but analyzes several images that show a dependence upon Flavius Josephus beyond the Bible itself. Further, she focuses on depictions of historical anecdotes, with only a few comments on allegory, portraiture, or single-figure compositions. The disciplined selectivity of this approach results in a necessarily incomplete picture of Rembrandt's dialogue with ancient literature, but Golahny's close investigation of a number of intriguing cases presents a model that may stimulate other researchers to continue the quest.

It should be noted that the inventory of 1656 was taken after Rembrandt had already surrendered many of his possessions to the auction block. We should not assume, therefore, that the twenty-two volumes listed were the only books he ever owned. Furthermore, as Golahny points out, other texts were available to him for browsing in the markets and in the libraries of acquaintances like Jan Six and Samuel Menasseh ben Israel (27-30). However, the books inventoried in 1656 are likely to have been the ones he could least afford to do without, and perhaps could justify keeping as tools of his trade. Several of them were illustrated editions, like the Josephus, and this further complicates Golahny's mission. Like many admirers of illustrated books, Rembrandt may have spent less time reading the texts than looking at the pictures. Indeed, while his engagement with pictorial precedent is well-known, the extent of his

literary acumen is still debatable: although Jan Emmens' famous description of the artist as a "pictor vulgaris" now seems exaggerated, it appears (as Golahny admits) that Rembrandt did not read with the humanist's thirst for knowledge, but with the artist's eye for descriptive motifs that would enhance his visual representations of marketable themes (236). He was clearly literate in Dutch and perhaps passably so in German, but, despite his education, he was not, like Rubens, a fluent Latinist (57). Further, Golahny recognizes the intriguing fact that although Rembrandt displayed a penchant for depicting people engaged in reading and writing (both historical figures and portraits), he did not (unlike his pupil Gerrit Dou) make a habit of portraying himself with the attributes of literacy (23). His relationship to the written word seems to have been more pragmatic than intellectual.

Following a preface that sets out the goals of the study, the book is organized into seven chapters. Each presents examples of Rembrandt's use of textual sources, noting wherever possible the relationship to a known edition of the relevant passage. The first chapter surveys the literary culture of Rembrandt's milieu. The literacy rate among Dutch citizens was unusually high, and artists and their patrons found numerous means of access to texts in a variety of formats and languages. Amsterdam had a public library as early as 1578 (29). Writers and painters shared rhetorical strategies such as *peripeteia*, the principle of dramatic reversal (46, 71). Chapter 2 considers Rembrandt's training, both as a pupil at the Latin school in Leiden, with references to the curriculum he would have followed there (55-56), and as an apprentice of Jacob van Swanenburgh and Pieter Lastman. Chapter 3 examines the books described in the inventory, including a volume on Jerusalem illustrated by Jacques Callot, whose imaginings of Biblical architecture evidently interested Rembrandt (87). Chapter 4 draws inferences about some of the books that were not individually catalogued, based on Rembrandt's treatment of themes from Ovid, Homer, Claudian and Scaliger (a textbook from his Latin school days) beginning in the 1630s. Chapter 5 suggests that he consulted German editions of three historical texts, including a Livy, the Josephus illustrated by Stimmer, and J.L. Gottfried's *Weltchronik* with engravings by Matthias Merian. Golahny posits that Rembrandt could probably read German simply because of the linguistic overlap with his own tongue; the illustrations in these volumes are also shown to have influenced several works by the artist and his pupils. Chapter 6 considers the late, less well-documented phase of Rembrandt's career: after 1656, despite reduced financial circumstances, he resumed his collecting habits. Certain choices in his late works indicate that he took a new interest in Tacitus and Plutarch (probably in translation). Among the paintings affected are the *Claudius Civilis* (Stockholm, 187-191), intended for the new Amsterdam Town Hall (where Roman history offered a pervasive role model for the new "Batavians"), and the mysterious *Self-Portrait as Zeuxis* (Cologne, 200-205).

Like so many specialized Rembrandt studies, this book investigates an element of the artist's life in detail in a manner for which few comparable studies exist. Especially welcome, therefore, is the final chapter, in which

Golahny sets Rembrandt's library in the context of other artists' collections and of recommended reading lists proposed by art theorists such as Willem Goeree and Gerard de Lairese. (This chapter might profitably be read first as a useful introduction to the general context.) Critical comments by authors such as Philips Angel and Samuel van Hoogstraten demonstrate that faithful adherence to textual sources was considered imperative for the history painter, while errors and omissions were open to ridicule by well-read viewers. Significantly, Rembrandt's teacher, Pieter Lastman, owned a larger library than most artists of his day; Lastman's continuing impact on Rembrandt has been traced by Golahny in earlier publications and remains a leitmotif of this study. Meanwhile, it emerges that Rembrandt was fairly typical in possessing only a small number of books, written in the vernacular Dutch (or German), on topics relevant to his pictorial specialties. Yet, the uses he made of these resources demonstrate a uniquely acute sensitivity to the telling detail or narrative nuance that could enliven his recounting of a historical scene (35). It is Golahny's eye for these details (in both text and image) and her careful observation of the ways in which Rembrandt deploys them that enable this study to offer many fresh insights. Lucidly written and cogently argued, *Rembrandt's Reading* is a valuable contribution to the complex question of Rembrandt's relationship with the literary culture of his time.

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