

# TO ETCH IS HUMAN

BY MEISHA ROSENBERG

## REMBRANDT: THE CONSUMMATE ETCHER

THE HYDE COLLECTION, THROUGH APRIL 8

## PASSPORT TO PARIS: NINETEENTH-CENTURY FRENCH PRINTS FROM THE GEORGIA MUSEUM OF ART

THE HYDE COLLECTION, THROUGH MARCH 25

**T**HE HYDE COLLECTION IN GLENS FALLS is a jewel box of a museum in what seems an unlikely place: on a bluff across from the huge paper-and-pulp-mill complex of Finch, Pruyn and Co. But it couldn't be a better spot for learning how, over the centuries, art and commerce have fed each other. The elegant Hyde home, completed in 1912 by Louis and Charlotte Hyde (née Pruyn), whose fortune was made at the mill, is worth visiting itself for the permanent collection, which boasts paintings by Ingres, Tintoretto, Van Dyck, Picasso, Whistler, and Rembrandt, just to mention a few.

Two current exhibitions in the modern gallery—*Rembrandt: Consummate Etcher*, and *Passport to Paris: Nineteenth Century French Prints from the Georgia Museum of Art*—show how printmaking and etching, nascent forms of mass production used by artists to sell their works on paper, have changed the way we think about art and reproduction. For these artists, printing and paper became not just an expedient way to make money, but a new way of making art.

Rembrandt, considered the master of printmaking, stretched the boundaries of a medium (etching) that had previously been used as an easier method than engraving for selling copies of paintings.

An etching is made when lines are drawn using a burin on a resin-coated copper plate. Then, the plate is exposed to an acid that eats through the lines for varying amounts of time depending on the desired

effects. The etched surface is then put through a press. But Rembrandt used more than one tool, scraping, stippling, and using varying line widths. He also made changes to etched plates, exploiting the dynamism of the medium. Through these combined methods, Rembrandt defined etching as an art form of its own that could transmit emotional depth. Domenic Iacono, director of the Syracuse University Art Collection that organized the exhibition, notes that Rembrandt's prints "give us a glimpse of the personality of the artist as well as the sitter."

Etching is similar to but distinct from engraving, a process in which the artist uses a pointed tool (graver or burin) to incise lines directly on metal. And several engravings here, such as *Martinus Pepyn (After Anthony van Dyck)* (1640) by Schelte Adams Bolswert, or *The Holy Family Returns From Egypt* (1620) by Lucas Vorstermans, show the fine precision of engraving at its best. One of the most

they can come across as cold and stiff.

In contrast, Rembrandt's etching *The Adoration of the Shepherds: A Night Piece* (1652), much of the image of which is in darkness, uses dramatic light and shadow to focus on the young Mary who pensively wonders at her new situation. Where the scene could easily become pomp and circumstance, Rembrandt shows humility and pathos in his subjects through what Iacono calls the "velvety nature of the inking" characteristic of drypoint. Gifted in religious scenes as in genre and landscape, Rembrandt uses open white space in *Landscape With Cottage and a Large Tree* (1641) to contrast with the tangle of hay, and vegetation surrounding a humble working home.

His portraits, notably *Self-Portrait Drawing at a Window* (1648), made when he was 42, and *Jan Lutma, Goldsmith*, and two of his mother (one part of the Hyde's own collection), are remarkable for their depth of character. A realistic old woman with wrinkles and sags, his mother appears piously reflective, and indeed, she served as model for saints in some of Rembrandt's religious paintings. Yet, far from being iconic, her portrayal shows warmth and respect. In *Self-Portrait* we see Rembrandt the

craftsman looking at the viewer with intimate candor. Light coming in from the window illuminates his face and even the irises of his eyes. Even after understanding the techniques Rembrandt used in his etching, one is still amazed at the subtlety and realism he achieved in a small (6¼-by-5-inch) image.

There are 18 of his etchings here—he made approximately 300 during his lifetime—in addition to more than a dozen prints by artists of the same period. And *Passport to Paris* contains some remarkable works that are heirs to Dutch prints, with pieces by Eugène Delacroix, Manet,

Felix Buhot, and Mary Cassatt. Even though they are separated by 250 years, Rembrandt's period and impressionism share a love for spontaneity and *plein air* naturalism. Whereas impressionists use light and movement to convey time passing, Rembrandt slows time down into meditation. ■



The depth of reflection: Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait Drawing at a Window*

remarkable works on display that shows both the feats and limitations of engraving is *The Napkin of St. Veronica* (1649), by Claude Mellan, a nuanced image of Christ made out of one continuous line that starts at the center of his nose. Despite the precise, realistic achievements of engravings,