



Catalogue of Drawings

"No one master has painted drama as Rembrandt did. Everything, even the smallest sketch, involves the human heart."

—ODILON REDON, 1878





Biblical,
Mythological
and
Historical Scenes



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After training under Jacob van Swanenburg in Leiden, in 1631 Rembrandt went to Amsterdam, where he studied under Pieter Lastman for six months. Lastman had specialized in narrative scenes from the Bible, mythology and Antiquity. So-called history paintings were held in high esteem because they were very challenging for the artist. Unlike, for example, landscapes, still lifes or portraits, the genre demanded that they design a narrative composition in such a way that the viewer also understood the significance. Biblical or historical persons were represented according to the Church's tradition of art, so that the public would recognize them. Moreover, the artist was required to reproduce feelings and emotions in an eye-catching manner and to give the event an individual interpretation which was also comprehensible for the viewer. A group of history painters lived and worked in Amsterdam, and Lastman was their most important representative.

Rembrandt's earliest paintings are clearly inspired by Lastman's works, but even later in his narrative compositions sometimes still demonstrate references to those of his Amsterdam teacher. In the design of narrative pictures, the works of earlier artists were frequently taken as a reference; they served as a starting point for the artist's own interpretation, whereby the motif would always remain recognizable. Artists found references in the works of their teachers but also in the printed graphics of earlier, particularly important artists like Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) and Jan van Eyck (1390–1441). Bible illustrations also played an important role for subjects that were less common in painting and printed graphics. The literary sources to which the artists turned were, of course, the Bible and the writers of Antiquity such as Ovid (4 BC–AD 17/18).

Rembrandt, his pupils and their successors were considered the most important seventeenth-century interpreters of biblical and mythological scenes, though other artists also focused on these topics. We know only a few drawings by Lastman, including just a few composition studies with narrative content (Sikström 2002, figs. 291, 292).

Remarkably, numerous drawings by Rembrandt with biblical scenes have survived. However, in most cases they were intended as references for his assistants and pupils and not as preliminary studies for paintings or engravings. The latter, in fact, were worked directly on the panel or canvas or the etching plate. The drawings produced within the context of other works had a quite different character compared with the compositions that served as references. This applies in particular to sheets of sketches which were created during the work, for example, on a painting or an etching. Their purpose was to help to find a solution for a particular problem within the composition, which Rembrandt had begun at a much earlier stage. In his Leiden period Rembrandt created a number of detail studies and a composition study "in between" (Cat. D4, 6, 7, 9) for *The Repentant Judas Betraying the Place of Silence* from 1632 (Cat. P4).

He also drew preliminary sketches for several engravings with non-pagan subjects (Cat. D4, 10, 11).

Between 1632 and 1633 Rembrandt worked in Hendrick Uylensburgh's studio in Amsterdam. He painted a large number of portraits, but probably drew very little. *Jonas Rescued by His Disciples* (Cat. D74) is an extensive large-format representation from 1634 which makes use of a variety of materials. It is regarded as a sketch for an etching which was never executed from a series of biblical scenes based on painted works, two of which were executed by Jan Gillisz. van Vlier (c. 1629–1660) (Cat. Est. 37).

After Rembrandt had established himself as an independent artist in May 1633, he needed drawings as references for his pupils. The master's model had to serve them as a starting point for the composition of their drawings. In practice this meant that the subject and also the posture and expression of the biblical figures were adopted from Rembrandt's work, but they were also exchanged and then transferred into a transferred composition.

Around 1636, Rembrandt created a fine group of drawings executed in an unusually sketch-like manner. They showed scenes from the Old and New Testament (Cat. D20–24, 40). One of these, *Christ Falls under the Cross* (Cat. D20), can be traced back to an engraving by Martin Schongauer (c. 1448–1491; p. 16), while the motif in *The Angel Lamenting Manasse and His Wife* (Cat. D24) looks like a direct borrowing from a woodcut by Dirk Willemsz. Coornhert (1523–1592) after Maarten van Heemskerck (1498–1574; Hollaender 49). Rembrandt's sketch-like, expressive style lends this distribution his own very personal stamp. He probably did not draw on his collection of prints and drawings very often, but the references which he found important were, so to speak, engraved in his inner eye as a result of his extensive experience of looking at things. He probably had a very well-developed visual memory. For Rembrandt the execution of a representation was equally or even more important than the distribution in the case of a composition. In this respect the pupils followed his example.

During the stages and stages Rembrandt drew a number of elaborately worked compositions as reference material, for example *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (Cat. D26), in which the feelings of the people are portrayed very expressively. In *The Holy Family in the Carpenter's Workshop* (Cat. D81) he uses a break to capture the atmosphere of a room with the light streaming in. In biblical scenes, the main focus lies on a particular incident or a special moment in a story, which is why the relationship between the people concerned is very important. The people in the picture show the reactions and emotions which correspond exactly to this moment in the scene in their facial expressions and bearing. As soon as Rembrandt had decided on the subject, he probably read the passage in the Bible. His drawings reveal an amazing ability to understand human behaviour, and an impressive gift to convey to us – mostly within a small format – what it is about. When drawing faces millimetres can make a