

Rembrandt's Portrait Psychology

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Johannes Lutma: Goldsmith, Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, 1656, etching and drypoint, Dutch

Around the seventeenth-century in Western Europe, the Netherlands was thriving in many ways, including their trade, military, science and especially art. This period was dubbed the Dutch Golden Age, and one of the leaders of the art world during this era was the artist, Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, known simply by his first name, Rembrandt. He practiced the art of both printmaking and painting, in which he successfully took the viewer into the psychology of his paintings and their subjects. His international reputation mostly came from his extraordinary skill in etching, a practice accomplished by the artist cutting into the metal with a specific acid that would react differently based on the incisions made by the artist.¹ The subjects of his etchings vary greatly from landscapes and self-portraits to biblical scenes and beggars. Rembrandt also etched those close to him, including his family and friends, one particular work depicting his friend Johannes Lutma, whom he etched and dry point printed on Japanese paper. Rembrandt illustrated aspects of both Lutma's personal character and professional life through his portrait by depicting him as an elderly silversmith surrounded by the tools of his craft, while also showing the viewer that Lutma was a benevolent and gentle elderly man that was financially and emotionally content with his life.

Born in Emden, Germany around 1584, Johannes Lutma was a Dutch silver and goldsmith during the Dutch Golden Age. After spending a portion of his life in Paris, he settled in Amsterdam where he met and befriended Rembrandt. As a silversmith, Lutma was most well known for the choir-screen in the Nieuwe Kerk, Amsterdam. His style was

¹ Kahren Jones Arbitman, Rembrandt. *The Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens*. (1997) http://www.carnegiemuseums.org/cmag/bk_issue/1997/mayjun/feat5a.htm

known as ‘auricular’ meaning of, relating to, or shaped like an auricle, or an ear.²

However, Lutma was predominately known for his depiction in Rembrandt’s etching.

When Johannes Lutma the Elder sat for this portrait he would have been approximately 72 years old, Rembrandt shows his age in his receding hair line can be seen beneath his hat and the wrinkles above his nose and stretch across his forehead and down towards his cheeks. The viewer can see his white feathery hair and his white beard, and also his frail vascular hands all indicate his age. The clothes Lutma wears reflects the typical fashion of the middle class in the mid seventeenth-century.³ He wears a loose fitting cloak on top of his vest complete with many small buttons, and atop his head he wears a small hat. This type of dress is typical of middle class clothing during the seventeenth-century, thus Lutma would have been a member of the middle class himself. His clothing lacks the presence of ruffles and lace that used too adorn the collars and the ends of the sleeves which conveys that he is not exceedingly wealthy, but rather a decently successful silversmith.⁴

Lutma sitting comfortably in a large wooded chair that is topped with two small-carved faces. His posture is relaxed as he rests slightly on his left forearm lighting gripping the arm of the chair. His face is also quite calm, showing that he is not a particular irritable old man. He has a slight grin and his eyes are peacefully staring out towards the viewer. Theodore Rousseau Jr., Vice Director and curator of European Art, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, argues in Rembrandt’s portraits, the eyes, “not only

² Elka Schrijver, “Amsterdam, Dutch Silver” *The Burlington Magazine* Vol. 122 No. 923 (1980) 149.

³ Scott A Sullivan, “Rembrandt’s Self-Portrait with a Dead Bittern” *The Art Bulletin* Vol. 62 No. 2 (1980) 238.

⁴ David R. Smith, “Rembrandt’s Early Double Portraits and the Dutch Conversation Piece” *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 64 No. 2 (1982) 264.

convey the mood of the model; they also make us aware of his inner life, of thoughts and feelings we know he has but which are beyond our grasp.”⁵ So through Lutma’s expression, the viewer observes Lutma as an approachable older man, opposed to a grumpy and crotchety elderly man because nothing is hostile about his persona, which is part of Rembrandt’s genius.⁶ He is able to illustrate someone’s exterior while simultaneously showing the viewer the subject’s inner psyche. Aristotle suggested, “The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance.” Rembrandt is able to show the viewer the personality of Johannes Lutma the Elder through his body language and physical presentation.

In the years leading up to and including the Renaissance, and still somewhat during the 17th century, portraits of non-religious or mythological people, like this portrait of Lutma, were reserved for the nobility, rulers, and members of the church; however, Rembrandt defies the norm and was known to illustrate many middle class and even lower class subjects. His portraits were not all intended for the walls of palaces or chapels, but rather, some for the walls of family homes.

The purpose of the portraits could be reflected in the size of them. The portrait of Johannes Lutma the Elder is approximately eight inches long and seven inches wide. This indicates that it was not intended to be viewed by the masses at a church ceremony, but instead it was to be personally enjoyed by a select group of people, probably those who knew Lutma. Additionally, because Rembrandt depicted this piece as an etching, the plate could be inked and replicated again and again, and the price of the art could be

⁵ Theodore Rousseau Jr., “Rembrandt.” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* Vol. 11 No. 3 (Nov. 1952) 82.

⁶ James A Schirillo and Melissa A. Fox, “Rembrandt’s Portraits: Approach or Avoid?” *Leonardo*, Vol. 29 No. 3 (2006) 255.

driven down to meet the budgets of middle class families. “Printmaking offered the seventeenth-century artist a two-dimensional medium with broad opportunities for visual expression, and a source of income. Unlike painting, a print exists in multiple copies and this is less expensive to buy and can reach a wider audience.”⁷ This new practice made art more accessible for middle class families, like that of Lutma. Additionally, artists also began creating pieces without the prior commission, so with a greater supply of art the costs of certain pieces could go down and, as previously mentioned, become more accessible for the lower classes.

Rembrandt created over 250 prints that show his interests varied greatly. Many of his etchings were under the genre of portraits.⁸ Early in his career he experimented with many self-portraits. He was “pursuing a vigorous, if crude, study of expression by sketching himself as he mugged and made mouths at the looking glass.”⁹ Through the numerous sketches of himself, Rembrandt became incredibly talented at portraying human emotion with deeper conviction than any artist had previously accomplished. Because of his intense study of his own emotions, he was able to “approach all his subjects [as] warm, tender, simple, and human.”¹⁰ He took the portrayal of human emotion into his portraits of family members, religious figures, men, women, children, and even beggars on the street. What was revolutionary and innovative about Rembrandt’s portraits, besides the fact that they were etchings, was his ability to make every person he illustrated seem like a unique individual. “What he conveys is not

⁷ Robert Neuman, *Baroque and Rococo Art and Architecture* (Pearson 2013), 199.

⁸ Arbitman. Rembrandt.

⁹ A. Hyatt Mayor, “Rembrandt in Italy.” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* (1942) 93-96.

¹⁰ Rousseau, “Rembrandt.” 81.

material. It has to do with those aspects of the human character, which are intangible, which are felt by sympathy and sensitivity rather than seen. They are implied by expression rather than made explicit in the shape of a forehead, chin or nose.”¹¹ All of his subjects had their own story.

With the story of Johannes Lutma, Rembrandt went even further than just to convey his character. Through the portrait he also shows the viewer Lutma’s professional life. Johannes Lutma worked as a silversmith, and in order to tell Lutma’s story, Rembrandt depicted him sitting amongst the typical tools of a seventeenth-century silversmith. On the table rest a hammer, a vessel containing metal punches, and also a drinking bowl. In his right hand, Lutma holds the stem of a candlestick that he may have been working on at the time. These pieces were incorporated into the painting to portray more about the professional story of Johannes Lutma, opposed to simply documenting what he looked like. The portrait acts as sort of a biography piece, telling something important about his life and what his role was in society, and preserving that message for the future.

In this portrait, Rembrandt was successfully able to portray the personal and professional characteristics of Johannes Lutma the Elder. Rembrandt dives into the psychology of Lutma and renders his intangible emotional state of serenity and composure onto the thin Japanese paper. He also shows the viewer Lutma’s profession through the tools resting on the side table next to him, and also through the piece of carved metal in his right hand.

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¹¹ Rousseau. “Rembrandt.”

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