

Rembrandt's Printmaking

Kelly Costello



Rembrandt's Printmaking



Rembrandt, Johannes Lutma: Goldsmith, 1656, etching and drypoint, Fleming
Museum, Burlington, Vermont

There are many reasons why Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn is considered one of the most celebrated and collected artists of all time. He was truly an embodiment of 17th century art and culture. Rembrandt was able to paint incredible academic masterpieces but could also etch and print a portrait easily accessed by the common

populaces. What is most remarkable about Rembrandt, however, is his experimentation in the medium of etching and drypoint. He was one of the first artists to popularize etching as a major form of artistic expression and he most definitely excelled at it, building completely new techniques that changed printmaking forever. Rembrandt's residence in Amsterdam is important to note, as an entire culture around Dutch printmaking was built around him. His 1656 etching, which is generally referred to as Johannes Lutma: Goldsmith¹ is a perfect example of a typical Rembrandt drypoint portrait. It survives in six different states, or reworked versions with added detail, with many other copies located around the world. Overall, Rembrandt's prints are exemplary works of art and they served to create a phenomenon in the history of engraving and printmaking.

It is important to fully dissect Johannes Lutma: Goldsmith to fully grasp both the purpose of the piece and the masterful technique within it. At first glance the portrait

appears to be of a smug-looking older gentlemen, seated in a chair. His unfocused gaze perfectly captures Rembrandt's fascination with depicting human personality traits and intimacy. It is also surprisingly realistic: Lutma may have an unfocused gaze because he had vision problems that forced him to constantly squint². Regardless of the meaning behind Lutma's expression, there are other aspects of the painting to



Lutma, Johannes the Elder, Dish, 1641, silver, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

explore. Some tools are scattered on the table to the viewer's right, and the background

¹ The painting pictured is the sixth and final version

² The Metropolitan Museum of Art . "Jan Lutma, goldsmith Rembrandt (Rembrandt van Rijn) (Dutch, Leiden 1606–1669 Amsterdam)." The Metropolitan Museum of Art . <http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/373068>.

seems unfinished, although there is a window. Upon further investigation, the man pictured, Johannes Lutma the Elder, was actually a relatively famous Dutch silversmith *and* goldsmith. He is portrayed with the tools of his trade; holding a candlestick while the table contains various punches and a hammer, as well as a silver platter that can actually be traced back to Lutma himself. Rembrandt's attention to detail in capturing Johannes Lutma as a human being is outstandingly naturalistic.

There are many aspects of the Goldsmith print that are typical of Rembrandt's artistic style. First, the pose of the sitter is mostly straightforward, yet slightly three-quartered, a feature seen in many of his portraits. There is also the medium utilized: drypoint and etching. The lines of the portrait create a distinctive triangle, using Lutma's form. The perspective is simple and straightforward and can be seen and understood from one single viewing point. Lastly, the background, although relatively flat, contains a window, which also serves as lighting for the piece.

The lighting effects in this piece are important. Rembrandt utilizes chiaroscuro, or the contrast of light and dark that creates depth and volume, in many of his pieces including this portrait of Lutma. Tenebrist techniques (when the artist uses large contrasts and dramatic yet murky illumination) are also employed in this print. These effects serve to create an ambient scene, and also lead the viewer's eyes to focus on the subject. These two techniques are a direct emulation of the Italian great, Michelangelo de Caravaggio. Rembrandt never left the Netherlands, and Caravaggio died before the former ever picked up a paintbrush, yet Caravaggio's influence extended far past Italy³. Other famous artists also inspired Rembrandt. He had a vast collection containing many famous Dutch prints

³ Mayor, A. Hyatt. "Rembrandt in Italy." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*. no. 2 (1942): 93-96.

and also had iconic German artist, Albrecht Dürer's work in his collection⁴. All of these aspects and inspirations combined equal a print that captures a specific moment in time while still retaining the focus on the sitter.

Although Rembrandt was a brilliant painter, the pinnacle of his career lies in his discoveries and exploration in the medium of printmaking. Before Rembrandt, etching was utilized but underdeveloped. The process of etching and printing is an intricate one. There are many different techniques and variations but intaglio is by far the most intricate because it is composed of three differing processes: engraving, etching, and drypoint⁵. Engraving is the process of inscribing an image directly onto a metal or wood surface using a sharp implement called a burin. Etching is when a metal plate is covered in an acid-resistant resin. The artist uses a stylus to carve the design into the plate, and then immerses it in a special acid solution. The acid removes the resin, leaving a permanent design on the metal plate. Drypoint, which is the technique utilized in Johannes Lutma: Goldsmith, is when a copper plate is inscribed with a stylus. The scratched lines created are then filled with ink and printed. Rembrandt's early prints were etched, but his later works are drypoint because he believed it added tonal richness.

Rembrandt experimented often with his prints, continuously searching for the best possible form. For example, he created darker, more visible lines by soaking the plates in acid for longer periods of time. Art historian Kahren Jones Arbitman writes that "Rembrandt's genius as an etcher lies in his recognition that this medium responds best to

⁴ *The Complete Etchings of Rembrandt*. Crown Publishers, 1970.

⁵ Heer, Ed de. *Technique of Etching*. Venice: Marsilio, 1999.
http://www.rembrandtpainting.net/rembrandt_etching_technique.htm (accessed March 10, 2014).

the light touch of a draftsman, not the heavy hand of a professional printmaker.⁶” He tried using porous wax on the plates. He also utilized differing forms of paper imported from Japan, such as a thin ivory yellow or a light grey. He even attempted using oatmeal and animal skins to print on⁷. Subtle gradation, tonal transitions, and an extended range of light and dark are examples of plays with technique that Rembrandt used. He rejected the traditional cross-hatching lines in drypoint for a more free form, which ultimately resulted in additional texture and tone. This can be seen in the loose strokes in Goldsmith. He treated etchings as drawings and it is easy to see the unrehearsed quality of them. This is extremely modern for his time period. For Rembrandt, printmaking was a private matter. His subjects evoke great emotion, and some of them even have mistakes. This is completely different than the public perception of art at the time. Mass produced printmaking was considered a public sphere. The Dutch print market was saturated with works and also very different from the former art world. Before the Dutch art trade, patrons were either of the bourgeoisie class or in the Catholic Church. Because plates can be covered in ink and printed multiple times, the artist can sell many copies of one piece. This makes the pieces less expensive, but also distributes them more widely. Rembrandt sold his prints to common people, but he had rich patrons as well. Goldsmith is one of the latter, commissioned by Jan Lutma the Younger (the subject’s son). Interestingly enough, the year it was created was also the year when Rembrandt declared bankruptcy and had to sell his house and his vast art collection, he probably needed Lutma’s patronage for

⁶ Arbitman, Kahren. *Rembrandt*. manuscript., Carnegie Museums, http://www.carnegiemuseums.org/cmag/bk_issue/1997/mayjun/feat5a.htm.

⁷ *Rembrandt and the Art of Etching*. Directed by Frank Robinson. : Cornell University, 2011.

income⁸.

In conclusion, Rembrandt is the Shakespeare of the art world. His works revolutionized the etching and drypoint processes. His influence was far-reaching. The Spanish artist Francisco Goya even cites him as an inspiration. Not only that but Rembrandt was highly praised and emulated when the French popularized etching once again in the late 19th century⁹. Through the techniques and emotion in his art, it is easy to understand why his prints were so well distributed and praised. Johannes Lutma: Goldsmith is the perfect piece to see all of the detail and expertise in his work. Rembrandt will forever be remembered as a talented and innovative printmaker.

⁸ Orenstein, Nadine. "Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669): Prints." The Metropolitan Museum of Art . http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/rembp/hd_rembp.htm.

⁹ *Rembrandt's Etchings: Introduction*. Directed by Frank Robinson. : Cornell University, 2011.

Bibliography

- Arbitman, Kahren. *Rembrandt*. manuscript., Carnegie Museums,
http://www.carnegiemuseums.org/cmag/bk_issue/1997/mayjun/feat5a.htm.
- Bruyn, J.. "Rembrandt and the Italian Baroque." *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 4.
- Orenstein, Nadine. "Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669): Prints." The Metropolitan Museum of Art . http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/rembp/hd_rembp.htm.
- Giltaij, Jeroen. "The Function of Rembrandt Drawings." *Master Drawings Association*. no. 2 (1988): 111-117.
- Heer, Ed de. *Technique of Etching*. Venice: Marsilio, 1999.
http://www.rembrandtpainting.net/rembrandt_etching_technique.htm (accessed March 10, 2014).
- Mayor, A. Hyatt. "Rembrandt in Italy." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*. no. 2 (1942): 93-96.
- The Metropolitan Museum of Art . "Jan Lutma, goldsmith Rembrandt (Rembrandt van Rijn) (Dutch, Leiden 1606–1669 Amsterdam)." The Metropolitan Museum of Art .
<http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/373068>.
- Milliken, William. "The Art of the Goldsmith." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* . no. 4 (1948): 311-322.
- Rembrandt Etchings "An Introduction" Presented by Art Historian Nicholas Usherwood*. Directed by Nicholas Usherwood. : Goldmark Gallery, 2012.
- Rembrandt's Etchings: Conclusion*. Directed by Frank Robinson. : Cornell University, 2011.
- Rembrandt's Etchings: Introduction*. Directed by Frank Robinson. : Cornell University, 2011.
- Rembrandt and the Art of Etching*. Directed by Frank Robinson. : Cornell University, 2011.
- Rembrandt: Selected Etchings*. Edited by Yevgeny Levitin. Leningrad: Aurora Art Publishers, 1973.
- The Complete Etchings of Rembrandt*. Crown Publishers, 1970.
- Van Straten, Roelof. "Rembrandt's "Earliest Prints" Reconsidered." *IRSA s.c.* no. 45 (2002): 167-177.