

# Rembrandt: Compliant Calvinist or Independent Thinker?

Kathleen Guler

American Military University

## ABSTRACT

Theories suggest that Calvinist Reformation dogma created a problem for artists in seventeenth century Netherlands by redefining the concept of grace. As a result, artists struggled to portray grace in a manner that aligned with Calvinist doctrine. Rembrandt (1606-1669) allegedly solved this problem when he “invented” an artistic style to satisfy the redefinition. Although Rembrandt’s subject matter appears to have properly portrayed Calvinist grace, the artist also expressed social and political commentary through his *oeuvre* with a remarkable independence from Reformation ideology. He was driven to perfect the dramatic, real life emotional values of themes *underlying* biblical stories—compassion, tolerance, forgiveness—as well as in gritty street scenes, portraits, and much more. In comparing and contrasting details of Rembrandt’s goals as an artist, his social attitudes, and the themes of his wide-ranging works against the context of the religious climate in which he lived, a strong suggestion emerges that this “invention” may never have been the artist’s intention at all.

**Keywords:** Rembrandt, Reformation, Calvinist Grace, Dutch Masters, Artists, Netherlands, Humanism, Independent Thought, Remonstrants

# Rembrandt: ¿calvinista conforme o pensador independiente?

## RESUMEN

Las teorías sugieren que el dogma de la Reforma Calvinista creó un problema para los artistas en los Países Bajos del siglo XVII al redefinir el concepto de gracia. Como resultado, los artistas lucharon por retratar la gracia de una manera que se alineara con la doc-

trina calvinista. Rembrandt (1606-1669) supuestamente resolvió este problema cuando “inventó” un estilo artístico para satisfacer la redefinición. Aunque el tema de Rembrandt parece haber retratado adecuadamente la gracia calvinista, el artista también expresó comentarios sociales y políticos a través de su obra con una notable independencia de la ideología de la Reforma. Se vio impulsado a perfeccionar los dramáticos valores emocionales de la vida real de los temas que subyacen a las historias bíblicas (compasión, tolerancia, perdón), así como en escenas callejeras, retratos y mucho más. Al comparar y contrastar los detalles de los objetivos de Rembrandt como artista, sus actitudes sociales y los temas de sus obras de gran alcance contra el contexto del clima religioso en el que vivió, surge una fuerte sugerencia de que esta “invención” puede nunca haber sido la intención del artista en absoluto.

**Palabras clave:** Rembrandt, Reforma, Gracia calvinista, Maestros holandeses, Artistas, Países Bajos, Humanismo, Pensamiento independiente, Manifestantes

## 伦勃朗：忠实的加尔文主义者还是独立思考者？

### 摘要

理论暗示，加尔文宗教改革教义通过重新定义恩典的概念，为十七世纪的荷兰艺术家创造了一个问题。结果则是，艺术家以与加尔文主义教条一致的方式，努力刻画恩典的形象。据称，当伦勃朗（生于1606年，卒于1669年）“发明”了一种能满足恩典再定义的艺术风格时，便解决了这一问题。尽管伦勃朗的画作主题看似恰当地描绘了加尔文主义式的恩典，这位艺术家也通过其全部作品表达了社会评论和政治评论，这些作品（的创作）在很大程度上独立于宗教改革意识形态。受到驱使，他需要完美展现圣经故事中隐含主题的夸张且真实的情感价值观—同情、容忍、原谅—和真实街边情景及肖像画等中的价值观。通过比较和对比伦勃朗时期的宗教氛围背景下他作为艺术家的目标、他的社会态度、他的广泛题材作品主题，得出了一个强烈的暗示，即所谓的“创造”可能从来就不是这位艺术家的意图。

关键词：伦勃朗，宗教改革，加尔文主义式恩典（Calvinist Grace），荷兰（艺术）大师，艺术家，荷兰，人权主义，独立思考，抗辩者

Retired University of Toronto English professor William H. Halewood has theorized that Calvinist Reformation doctrine created a problem for artists in the Netherlands by redefining the concept of grace. As a result, artists struggled to portray grace in a manner that aligned to Calvinist doctrine. Rembrandt allegedly solved the problem when he “invented” an artistic style to satisfy this redefinition.<sup>1</sup> While biblical topics indeed comprised a healthy percentage of Rembrandt’s subject matter and appear to portray the Calvinist conception of grace, the artist also expressed social and political commentary through his *oeuvre* with a remarkable independence from Reformation ideology. By comparing and contrasting details of Rembrandt’s goals as an artist, his social attitudes, and the themes of his wide-ranging works against the context of the religious climate in which he lived, a strong suggestion emerges that the “invention” of Halewood’s focus may never have been the artist’s intention at all.

The problem that Halewood perceives for Netherlandish artists is that the Protestant concept of grace—the unmerited gift from God of divine love and protection—was not being portrayed properly in art. Anti-humanist Protestant austerity stifled the spectacular celebration of human life that had developed in Renaissance art and, in some places, almost completely eliminated it. In the Netherlands, Reformers believed the good life was unattainable because of man’s sinfulness thus, art must be redefined along the same lines as religion’s redefinition and grace, as

God’s greatest gift, had to be recognized for its tremendous generosity against man’s sinfulness.<sup>2</sup>

Calvinist Protestantism dominated the seventeenth century Netherlands in which Rembrandt lived and it certainly overshadowed his upbringing. Calvinism had reached the Netherlands in the mid-to-late-1500s, and by the time Rembrandt was born in Leiden in 1606, half the Dutch had converted from Catholicism to Calvinism, Lutheranism, Anabaptism, Mennonitism, and other Protestant followings. Calvinism’s austerity not only caused tension with Catholics and Jews, it split along class lines and was embroiled in the politics of the Dutch War of Independence (1568-1648) from Catholic Spain. Wealthier, less austere upper-class liberals, called Remonstrants, favored peace. Hardliner Counter-Remonstrants of the lower classes wanted to continue the fight. This rift caused further stress within Dutch society.

Against this gloomy religious and politically acrimonious climate, Rembrandt received a humanist education. The humanism movement of the Renaissance that had pervaded Europe expressed the ideal of a moral hero living the good life in earthly happiness, a concept drawn from Aristotelian thought, which European intellectuals embraced. Particularly in Italy, but spreading elsewhere as well, the celebration of the perfect human image in painting and sculpture pursued a “golden world of harmony, symmetry, and fulfilled aspiration, a revelation in human terms of universal beauty.”<sup>3</sup>

As the ninth of ten children and the youngest son of an upper-middle-class miller, Rembrandt was fortunate that his family could afford to send him to good schools. Even though humanism was still the basis of education at the time of his generation—this changed soon after, in 1625—the religious instruction included in school also encompassed the “true religion,” otherwise known as Calvinist Protestantism.<sup>4</sup> During Rembrandt’s schooling, he would have spent much time studying the Bible, which provided numerous subjects for the career on which he would soon embark. At thirteen, he went to Leiden University, with the goal of preparing himself for a life of civic duty, a typical occupation for a middle-class man in the Calvinist Netherlands.<sup>5</sup>

However, within about a year of enrolling at the university, Rembrandt already began to show he was not going to have a typical life. He quit school and immediately began an apprenticeship as an artist; his new goal was possibly to become a court painter. A German artist, Joachim von Sandrart (1606-1688), noted in a biographical sketch in 1675 that Rembrandt could “only read Netherlandish poorly, and therefore gained little from reading.”<sup>6</sup> Perhaps poor academic performance explains why he left school so abruptly. More likely, however, he was simply disinterested and decided to follow his growing inclination towards art.

As a young apprentice, Rembrandt was absolutely determined to become a premier history painter. Dutch

painter Karel van Mander (1548-1606), in his book, argued that the only worthwhile art is based on mythological, classical, and allegorical scenes, categorized as “history painting.” Anything else was beneath an artist’s dignity. Portraiture, though esteemed—depending upon the subject of the portrait—was deemed less prestigious, mainly due to the need to flatter the patron. Paintings of streets, shops, humorous subjects, and similar genre scenes were another level down. Landscapes and still life scenes occupied the lowest category of all. In the seventeenth century, an artist was judged by his patrons; to be a history painter could bring artists the patronage of nobility or even royalty, which in turn would give them enormous prestige and the possibility of earning a good living. Rembrandt had the talent for this. Further, he acted on the ambition and pride that his parents and teachers seemed to have instilled in him from childhood. Most artists became proficient in only one skill and concentrated on a particular type of imagery, such as portraits or landscapes. Rembrandt proved able to do most anything. Artistically, he found great inspiration in the work of the Italian painter Caravaggio (1571-1610) and the Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640). Italian Renaissance painters popularized the highly rendered play of light and dark, called *chiaroscuro*, which became a fad in the Netherlands. Rembrandt carried this use of dramatic light much further, as he mastered both painting skills and the art of etching. Moreover, he pioneered the combination of genres, creating the notion of not just a history painter, but

also a dramatist. He became obsessed with telling a story through a painting or etching, finding the decisive moment in a scene, and through it, expressing commentary that was religious, social, political, or all three.

In light of his artistic goals, how religious Rembrandt actually was is difficult, if not impossible, to determine. Biblical tales were a principal source for Rembrandt's storytelling. The Italian artist Filippo Baldinucci (1624-1697) claimed that Rembrandt "professed in those days the religion of the Menonites."<sup>7</sup> Scholars have speculated on the truth of this claim, noting that austere black and white Mennonite clothing and themes of family ties, honesty, piety, charity, and patience recurred often in Rembrandt's art. However, the clothing of those images was common to the period and worn by both Remonstrants and Catholics alike. Rembrandt's father was most likely a liberal Calvinist Remonstrant, but how much influence his father had on him is unknown. Regardless, Rembrandt did not appear to have adhered to or cared for any organized religion.<sup>8</sup>

Rembrandt produced his first known painting, *The Stoning of St. Stephen*, in 1625. While art critics do not consider it a good painting, it already demonstrated Rembrandt's strong drive to become a history painter and his dramatic storytelling capabilities. It shows a group of men wielding stones the instant before they crush a martyr's skull. In the background is a group of men who show utter indifference to Stephen's plight. Behind the group of

stone throwers, a face gazes out at the painting's viewer with an "expression of glee—another nice, chilling touch" to the story's mood, in the words of Rembrandt biographer Charles L. Mee.<sup>9</sup> Intriguingly, art experts identify the face as one of Rembrandt's many self-portraits. What was he trying to convey? Within the context of Rembrandt's time, the tightening austerity of the Calvinists narrowed religious tolerance. With hardliner Counter-Remonstrants pushing for continued war against Catholic Spain, a Remonstrant leader had been arrested and beheaded in 1619 during a period of sectarian strife. In this painting, Rembrandt appears to have made a daring and courageous plea for peace and tolerance, putting him on the side of the liberal Remonstrants.

But was Rembrandt truly commenting on this event? Perhaps, but not necessarily. The painting appeared in the same year that Prince Frederik Hendrik came to power. Perhaps Rembrandt wanted to appear in a favorable light to the prince or to wealthy liberal Calvinists who might confer a lucrative history painting commission upon him. While this is conjecture, like any other artist, in his early days Rembrandt struggled to establish his career through a good reputation.

Whether Rembrandt ever read van Mander's book on the rules of art is doubtful, but he probably knew of it. Even if he had read it, he produced art by his own rules, not the way others thought he should. He continued to paint history scenes, numerous society portraits that were the building blocks

of his financial success in the 1630s, and dozens of self-portraits. In all of these works, he built upon the traits that would become his signature as an artist. Regardless of the subject, he chose to portray the subject's theme at the instant of a revelation, the shock of a miracle as it happened, the invisible divine presence reflected in the subject's eyes, or the moment that grief, relief, compassion, or any other emotion was at its most intense. Sandrart noted that Rembrandt, who taught art to the children of wealthy families for several years, steered his students away from the idealized beautiful bodies of the Italian Renaissance tradition. He stressed that the perfect proportions and "politically correct" depictions of aristocrats with noble virtues was not real life and the artist should look for the plain, real world.<sup>10</sup> In biblical scenes, he also showed attitudes, gestures, and actions that reflected real life. For example, one of his images of Jesus preaching shows his listeners exhibiting a range of responses from rapt attention to abject boredom. This sort of depiction, which for Rembrandt was more common than not, brought him both popularity and disdain. It certainly would not have endeared him to proper Calvinists.

Going against the rules—any rules—was a characteristic that governed Rembrandt for much of his life. In spite of the biblical subjects that so many of his works portrayed, his social attitudes appear to have taken precedence over religious thought. Early on, Rembrandt moved into the cheap, run-down artists' quarter of Amsterdam, on Sint Antoniesbreestraat, St. Anthony's

Broad Street. Initially he could not have afforded a better neighborhood, but regardless, it seems to have had plenty of appeal for him. It was full of artists, writers, scholars, publishers, art dealers, and immigrants. The shops sold items that made appropriate props for his paintings, objects like old helmets, swords, violins, cloaks, and hats. Taverns provided drink, camaraderie, and prostitutes who were willing models. Old Jewish men posed for scenes from the Old Testament, and immigrants and soldiers who survived the wars made intriguing subjects for exotic scenes. Small scruffy dogs, old toothless women, blind men, beggars and cripples, street urchins, and the downtrodden all lived in this neighborhood, giving Rembrandt more than enough material to infuse his scenes with the deep sense of reality he craved to portray.

Rembrandt seems to have always been a bit of an outsider in Dutch society. Even his name—Rembrandt—was old-fashioned for the time, another aspect, though minor, that set him apart and out of place. He must have felt comfortable among the many languages and religions of the poor, the foreign, and the outcast. Among the members of the Jewish community who lived in the neighborhood, a rabbi and scholar called Menasseh ben Israel, who knew ten languages and ran the leading Jewish press in northern Europe, became a close friend. Menasseh was a bit unorthodox in his own ideas, an appealing trait to Rembrandt, who tended to displease Calvinists by painting Jesus as a Jew. He also illustrated Menasseh's book *The Glorious Stone* and did more por-

traits of Jews than any other Amsterdam painter, another point of contention for the Calvinists. Rembrandt did not seem to care what his critics thought of him for doing so. His temperament and motivation seemed to come from warmth and tolerance, not ideology, as the early painting *The Stoning of St. Stephen* suggests.<sup>11</sup> Even during his period of success in the 1630s, when he bought one of the largest houses in Amsterdam, he was still more or less in the same neighborhood, just around the end corner of Sint Antoniesbreestraat. He lived there for at least twenty years until bankruptcy forced him to move to the Jordaan, another poor neighborhood known as an enclave for outsiders.

Never modest, Rembrandt's attitudes towards other social conventions further support a disregard of Calvinist morals. Scandals plagued him, their origins of his own making. Some stemmed from the subject matter of his artwork. Like a shape-shifter, he portrayed himself in dozens of self-portraits, ranging from experimental expressions in the 1620s that give the impression of a sardonic sense of humor to theatrical disguises in the 1630s that many considered outrageously pretentious. Risky bedroom scenes in which his wife Saskia modeled set gossip rampaging.

Further scandals that would have heaped disdain on him came after Saskia's death in 1642: Rembrandt cohabited with two women, first with his son's nurse, then with a young housekeeper, Hendrickje Stoffels, until her death from the plague in 1663. He did not marry either woman, most likely

due to money issues stemming from Saskia's inheritance. He never kept household records to keep track of his money—or the lack of it. Out of utter distaste for cooperating with governmental entities, Rembrandt often neglected to pay taxes, file necessary court papers, or answer legal summons. Noted for his rudeness at times, probably due to these struggles, he lost patrons and was able to secure only a few commissions. Yet he had the resourcefulness, or audacity, to evade notaries and to connive others into lending him even more money despite his manipulations and well-known untrustworthiness. He was incredibly creative in dodging creditors and continued to dig himself into a bottomless pit of debt.

The tone of Rembrandt's works grew more frank and analytical in the last decade of his life, probably reflecting the loss of Saskia and Hendrickje and the weight of his financial problems. He gave up society portraiture, and while sometimes erratic in quality, his scenes concentrated on lonely, anonymous figures, some simply domestic, but many in the biblical genre. He appears to have come closer to the "invented" artistic style that Halewood describes. Of the Reformation subjects that allegedly satisfied the master theme of forgiveness or mercy, Rembrandt illustrated them all, often many times over. But was this the "invention" Halewood posits?<sup>12</sup>

Stylistically, Dutch Reformation art in general had already been playing down the "prettiness" of earlier art, moving towards simplicity, darker colors, minimal gestures, and blurred

lines. Many artists adapted by retreating to neutral subjects such as portraiture, landscapes, still-lives, classical mythology, and history, anything that would not offend Calvinist reformers.<sup>13</sup> As noted, Rembrandt had followed suit with the use of dramatic *chiaroscuro*. Further, art historian Julius Held stated, “Nothing indeed seems to support the theory that to the contemporary Dutchmen Rembrandt’s art appeared strange, eccentric or out of line with what they knew from other artists.”<sup>14</sup>

One of the most important subjects Halewood identified, the conversion of the apostle Paul, offers a clue to Rembrandt’s thinking. The artist portrayed Paul at least eleven times. Calvinists considered Paul a hero, the Protestant everyman. One sketch shows him weakened from his conversion, crumpled and in need of God’s mercy—Calvinist grace. Other works show him in quiet, contemplative moods with accompanying symbolism in accordance with Calvinist principles. Rembrandt even produced a self-portrait in which he posed as Paul. Yet the dates of these renditions range from very early to very late in the artist’s career. Rather than developing a style to satisfy the definition of Calvinist grace, Rembrandt was already creating works from the beginning that fit the ideal.

Rembrandt’s upbringing amidst the all-pervasive Calvinist doctrines and attitudes would have likely saturated his knowledge of biblical subjects. He would not have read religious treatises—Halewood believes this is true<sup>15</sup>—but even without this aid, Rembrandt

likely would have known the symbolism and dogma by heart, like a tool used so often the craftsman no longer needs to think how to manipulate it—he simply used it. Rembrandt employed these topics again and again. Moreover, the only known phrase with which he described his own artwork was “the deepest and most lifelike emotion.”<sup>16</sup> Certainly, the artist was a thinker in the sense that he studied more than just Calvinist subjects. Profoundly driven, he perfected the dramatic and real-life emotional values of the themes *underlying* the biblical stories—compassion, tolerance, forgiveness, and many more along this line.

Further, unlike his creditors and despite his sometimes questionable actions, no mention of hounding Calvinist “moral police” appears in any records. Possibly, his religious paintings were considered proper enough to keep moralists at bay, but more likely, the Calvinist Church had little power over him because he disregarded its authority in the way he did other conventions of society. He appears to have never received help from the Reformers either.

Indeed, Halewood is not even sure whether Rembrandt intentionally set out to “invent” a Reformationist style. He attempts to “locate Rembrandt in relation to the dominant religious attitudes of his time and place, emphasizing what was *typical* rather than *individual* in his faith.” Halewood states he is simply suggesting this thesis rather than making an exhaustive study.<sup>17</sup> Further, as an English professor, not art historian, Halewood focused on the Refor-

mation idea of grace, both in his book on Rembrandt and in another he wrote on seventeenth century poetry. Perhaps he narrowed his analysis so far that he missed the real mission of Rembrandt's art: to perfect the dramatic emotional quality of the themes he portrayed.

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## Notes

- 1 William H. Halewood, *Six Subjects of Reformation Art: A Preface to Rembrandt* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), ix–x.
- 2 Ibid., 4.
- 3 Ibid., 19.
- 4 Bob Haak, *Rembrandt: His Life, His Work, His Time*, trans. by Elizabeth Willems-Treeman (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1969), 18–19.
- 5 Charles L. Mee, Jr., *Rembrandt's Portrait: A Biography* (n.p.: New Word City, 2013), Kindle edition, 120.
- 6 Joachim von Sandrart, “Life of Rembrandt, from *Teutsche Academie*, 1675,” in *Lives of Rembrandt*, ed. by Charles Ford (London: Pallas Athene, 2007), 29.
- 7 Filippo Baldinucci, “Life of Rembrandt: from the Cominciamento e Progresso dell’arte d’intagliare in rame colle vita de’ più eccellenti maestri della stessa professione, 1686” in *Lives of Rembrandt*, ed. Charles Ford (London: Pallas Athene, 2007), 40.
- 8 Mee, *Rembrandt's Portrait*, 703.
- 9 Ibid., 663–664.
- 10 Ibid., 1886–89.
- 11 Ibid., 1662.
- 12 Halewood, *Six Subjects*, 143.
- 13 Ibid., 5, 28.
- 14 Julius S. Held, “Reflections on Seventeenth Century Dutch Painting,” *Parnassus* 11, no. 2 (February 1939): 16, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/771724>.
- 15 Halewood, 136.
- 16 Mee, 2068.
- 17 Halewood, ix. Emphasis is mine.