

Facing Time

Self-Portraits

&

Essays

by

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1973-2022

Preamble

Seeking the Artist

Living the Artist's Life

Delusion and Addiction

Discovery and Acceptance

Epilog



Rembrandt van Rijn Self-Portrait, c.1665, oil on canvas

Life can only be understood backwards;
but it must be lived forwards.

Soren Kierkegaard

4 Postcards from Kenwood House, London, UK



Students at the Anti-Vietnam War Protest, Grosvenor Square, London, UK, 1970

1970

Blame Rembrandt

Flag-waving, smash capitalism mobs rushed the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square yelling “Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Min.” The mounted police ringing the entrance flexed back from the press of the crowd driven forward by the running Trotskyites and Anarchists. Their horses reared, but the blue uniformed police steadied them by leaning into their manes and patting their necks. No breach appeared in the wall of horses. When the thrust dissipated, the bobbies charged forward swinging their wood truncheons at the protestors’ heads. The radical throng retreated. The student participants were the next targets. The horses were turned to confront them. The students ran across the square into the small side streets, searching for escape by the underground tube. I retreated to my favorite peaceful place, Hampstead Heath, and entered Kenwood House to commune with his beloved painting, Rembrandt’s “Self-Portrait with two circles” painted at age 60.

Rembrandt’s aged face had pocked skin, dropped jowls, and wrinkles on his forehead and cheeks. He looked at me with a weary and accepting expression that

nonetheless revealed his self-assurance. His clothes were unpretentious -- a black cape with a scruffy fur collar, a dull red vest, a white mottled shirt, and a casually placed white cap perched above his unruly whitish hair. In the left hand, in deep shadow, he held a mallet stick, brushes, and a darkish palette. He stood against a tannish-bluish background effused with gentle velvety light that flowed across the surface of the Dutch artist's head from the upper right illuminating a little more than half the face. The somber tones and shadows focused my gaze on a bright spot at the tip of the bulbous nose that was Rembrandt's beacon. The Dutch artist revealed his private world and held in silence the fate he had endured. Truthfulness, timelessness, a tremendous artistic ability, and a sense of his time were captured in this 17th century oil painting. Seeing him calmed and consoled me. I heard Rembrandt murmur to me, "This is the way the world works. Get used to it."

The world was in chaos, I believed. The Cold War with the Soviet Union worried the world about nuclear war. America was losing the Vietnam War, anti-war protests occurred across the USA and Europe, and Riots broke out after the assassination of Martin Luther King. I became vulnerable for the Vietnam War draft. I decided to flee the country for architecture school in swinging London with its Carnaby Street culture. The move allowed me time to consider whether to become an architect, a profession I had doubts whether he wanted to pursue. My girlfriend, who was studying to be an artist, visited me. I took her to see the Rembrandt self-portrait at Kenwood House. Afterwards she drew a portrait of me that stirred my desire to be an artist.



Carlton Davis by Reiko Sunami, 1970
Ink on page of Composition Book, 4 1/2" x 5 1/2"

I stared at the Rembrandt self-portrait many times over the years. Every time I went to London, I'd made a visit. In 1970, before I left England to return to America, I wrote in my journal that the painting was very abstract, "When you get close, it dissolves into a set of deliberate brush strokes and subtle color relationships. The paint, applied in impasto, smears, scumbles, smudges, and with the lines drawn with brushes and brush stick ends, creates an impression of extraordinary realism. Rembrandt is there, an enduring presence; his creative method is forever a fresh exploration, in which the maker is aware of who he is and how he made his art."

The Kenwood Rembrandt demanded that I figure out a way to become an authentic artist.

To be a self-portraying artist was to comprehend the nature of the changing self, its connection to all human experience, and the world inhabited. To deepen my understanding of the self-portrait history, I studied many famous artists who explored the genre. I focused on Rembrandt, growing familiar with all his work and reading the history of his time. I sought out as many of the self-portraits as he could, from Rembrandt's earliest work, when the cocksure young man came to Amsterdam, through his middle life when he costumed himself in the exotic robes of Turks and French nobility and had become a favorite of the Dutch nouveau riche, to his declining years when he lost favor and created images of starker realism with a darker and brighter contrasting luminosity. For 39 years Rembrandt rendered his likeness. Not all appeared as what was thought he looked like. The nose changed, the face widened, the eyes separated a little more. My own self-portraits had been created over 49 years with increasing facility over the each passing year. They recorded, as Rembrandt's self-portraits did, an image sometimes not close to what I really looked like, but they were representations of what I was and the circumstances of my life.

I got a late start but lived longer than the Dutch master. When I began, I had no idea what I was doing. The first portrait came about because I felt a need to draw something that wasn't a design or an interpretation of some place he had visited. Rembrandt's self-portrait came to mind, and the subject matter was close at hand. Making an image of himself became a habit undertaken in serial years, abandoned for a time, and started again. The more I drew self-portraits, the more I became interested in what other artists had done; and the more I saw, the more I tried to discover what I could do with different means. No matter what I used to draw: pencils, pastels, and oil sticks, I saw that my self-portraits had emotional baggage, which for theorists of modern art made them antiquated. "So be it," I said!

Three years after making the Kenwood self-portrait, Rembrandt died a pauper. He returned to his unpretentious roots, a tradesman from Leiden where his father was a miller and his brother, a shoemaker. The once renowned artist, now humbled, was a workman. He stood unbowed and unbroken, in his studio garb at the nadir of his career. His clients had abandoned him. The artist's reputation was ruined by his cohabitation without marriage to Hendrickje Stoffels, his housekeeper. In his increasing isolation and rejection, Rembrandt created the 1665-1669 self-portrait, a powerful portrayal of a declining man in a declining society. I conjectured that in 1665 when Rembrandt started the artwork, he could view the Amsterdam docks from the painting studio on the top floor of his residence.

The world of the Netherlands and Rembrandt's world were in turmoil. I imagined Rembrandt consumed with worry at his declining circumstances, he would peer out the window at the badly damaged surviving ships of the Dutch naval fleet returning one by one from the battle with the British. The Battle of Scheveningen of the first Anglo-Dutch war was the beginning of the decline of the Netherlands' world power. In 1665 Nieuw Amsterdam was lost to rising British strength and became New York City. Rembrandt might have considered the remnants of the fleet, a visual metaphor

for his mounting problems. Four years later in 1669, when Rembrandt finished the self-portrait, he went bankrupt. He lost his home, his painting studio, and his possessions were sold off to his debtors. I critiqued the self-portrait stating I believed Rembrandt looks straight ahead in spite of his unfortunate situation with his aging body pinned and part of the circles of time revealing the waning of his artistic influence and of 17th Century Dutch society's too."



The Battle of Scheveningen, August 10, 1653, Willem van de Velde the Elder. 1657, Ink and oil on canvas, 170 cm (66.9 in x: 289 cm (113.7 in), Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

The 17th century Netherlands was described as "a counting house with a navy." The 20th and 21st century United States we inhabited, was an analogous culture. It was the center of world capitalism and finance. We also had a powerful navy. I speculated that we Americans were the 20th Century heirs to the Dutch of Rembrandt's time. Powerful but flawed, we faced the same inevitability of decline. Time had revealed our strength and our weakness. The society had genius but was damaged and aged. I aspired to explore my culture through the medium of drawing to see what I looked like, and to capture in words with images, who I was. I wished to understand what I had become, when I became what, and what events I had passed through. This was outcome I tried to achieve with my "Facing Time" project.

Blame it on Rembrandt! He was the genesis and guide for the project.