

Rembrandt's Other *Prodigal* *Son*

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Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669), *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 1636, Dutch. Etching on laid paper. Plate: 15.6x 13.7 cm; sheet: 15.9 x 14 cm. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (<http://www.nga.gov>); gift of Ruth B. Benedict in memory of William S. Benedict and in honor of the 50th anniversary of the National Gallery of Art



Of all the parables in the New Testament it is the story of the Prodigal Son that has most often captured the imagination of Western artists. A life-size version by Rembrandt (1606-1669), which Catherine the Great acquired in 1766 for the royal palace in St Petersburg (and which remains today at the Hermitage), is probably the most famous. Rembrandt completed this monumental work only in the last year of his life, 1669, but it is evident that the subject had been on his mind for years, at least since 1636 when he published the etching *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. In sharp contrast to the large (eight feet by six feet) Hermitage canvas, the etching is measured in inches: six by five. It is smaller than half a sheet of business stationery; the image is the same size it appears on this page. If the one is imposing, requiring a certain distance and proper lighting for viewing, the other has the intimacy of a personal prayerbook; it can be carried about in the hand and its story contemplated whenever and in whatever light the viewer chooses. The story is as eloquently told in the one as in the other, but because the smaller is less intimidating, it becomes the more lovable.

Except for a brief period of study in Amsterdam in 1624, Rembrandt had remained with his parents in his native Leiden until 1631, when, just after the death of his father, he settled permanently in Amsterdam. He was 25. From a quiet, sedate, academic town he had come to a bustling commercial center, where the newly rich were full of pride and ambition and eager to preserve not only their likenesses, but their property, even their civic and social standing, on canvas. Almost immediately, Rembrandt became one of the busiest portrait painters in Amsterdam. Of the some 400 oils he completed during his lifetime (in addition to the more than 1000 drawings

and nearly 300 etchings also attributed to him), more than 50 were completed during the first two or three years in Amsterdam. In 1636, the year of the *Prodigal Son* etching, Rembrandt had been in Amsterdam for five years. He and Saskia, the niece of his art dealer, had been married for two years and were living comfortably, even luxuriously, on Rembrandt's substantial income and Saskia's considerable dowry. (It is reported that for individual portraits Rembrandt received from 50 to 500 guilders and that for group portraits he received 100 guilders per head.) Besides his numerous commissions, Rembrandt was also in business with Saskia's uncle. But even in these early years, there were shadows. Their marriage had been blessed with a son, born in December 1635, but within months, in early 1636, the infant, named Rumbartus for Saskia's deceased father, had died.

Rembrandt's output of commissioned portraits had begun to diminish even before 1636. So had the number of his etchings. Quality, on the other hand, did not. If anything, the lesser quantity meant higher quality. For inspiration Rembrandt went often to a collection of prints he owned by the 16th-century Netherlandish painter and print designer Maarten van Heemskerck. Van Heemskerck, who had died in Haarlem some 30 years before Rembrandt was born, was one of the early Dutch artists to study in Italy. He quickly became an enthusiast for late Renaissance art in general and for Michelangelo's works in particular. It was he who introduced the Italianate style to Dutch art. Large numbers of his designs were printed throughout the 17th century and well into the 18th century, where they were a source of inspiration for numerous artists.

Rembrandt's etching of the *Prodigal Son* is indebted to van Heemskerck for both its composition and some of the figures. The expression, however, is Rembrandt's alone. Who could express with such eloquence and economy the bitter anguish in the son's face or the total concern in the father's? What is not shown in their faces is shown in their bodies: Together they form a rounded triangle, almost an oval, which suggests a maternal element to the father's forgiveness, one that goes beyond justice, to mercy. The other three figures, whose expressions range from curiosity to unconcern, only emphasize the exclusiveness of this moment between father and son. The viewer, too, for all the apparent openness of the scene, is kept at a psychological distance by an almost unnoticed detail: Tossed aside and lying diagonally at the youth's feet, on the outer edge of the step, is his walking stick. While not hiding the action, visually it separates the viewer from the drama as a stage separates an audience from the actors. The symbolic significance of the walking stick is even stronger: The son no longer needs it. He has reached not only his father's house; he is home as well.

For the more than 45 years of his professional life, on canvas and on paper, Rembrandt recorded the lights and shadows of his own journey. In some three score and ten self-portraits he shared his most intimate joys and sorrows, hopes and disappointments. Did he see in the *Prodigal Son* another of these self-portraits? And if so, was he the wayward son, or the forgiving father? Or was he both?