things, to make them holy, to give them life, to bless them and to grant them to us.

Through him, with him and in him there is to you, God the Father almighty, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all honour and glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

REMBRANDT AT THE BRITISH MUSEUM

MARIA SHIRLEY

REMBRANDT'S art reveals a unique reverence and appetite for life which originated in an entirely different attitude and vision from the extrovert thirst for sensual excitement animating the tavern scenes by Jan Steen and other Dutch painters. Rather he evinced an insatiable curiosity about reality, about matter informed by spirit, and if he depicted *genre* scenes they indicated a pervasive intangible quality beyond the facts of their immediate physical appearance. The acuteness of his observation enabled him to translate the most complicated forms and structures—struggling children, wild beasts, carriages—into drawings where their particular essentials are seized with an inimitable assurance and spontaneity: a single calligraphic curve defines the receding plane of an upturned nose, a bold prolonged oval stroke the thrust and fulness of an abdomen. Like Constable he was an intuitive rather than a scientific draughtsman: that his results are objectively convincing is a triumph of optical and manual co-ordination.

However, it is not mere technical virtuosity which provides the key to his perennial fascination. His *oeuvre* represents a continual and gradual elimination of superfluities in an unending quest for visual equivalents of the fundamental mystery which lies at the heart of all human experience. Contrary to the usual pattern of responsiveness, his sense of wonder increased with age, and compassionate wonder became the ultimate theme of his art, culminating in the painting of the 'Prodigal Son' with its universal and personal hope of Divine mercy.

This level of profundity was slowly and painfully acquired in

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which the vicissitudes and betrayals of personal tragedy played their part. The forms and conceptions of his early period are markedly different from the poignant simplifications of his latter years—although like other masters he occasionally reverted to an earlier mode of presentation. Consequently a chronological arrangement of the graphic works would have been more valuable than the comparative and didactic treatment employed at the British Museum with its scanty dating. Above all, the present arrangement by subject matter deprives the exhibition of a natural climax which the chronological sequence of the Michelangelo drawings achieved so superbly in the last Crucifixion groups. Such criticism seems a trifle ungrateful perhaps in the face of such intelligent and instructive comparisons as the 'Abraham entertaining the Angels' with the Mogul miniature of the 'Seated Dervishes', or the originals and copies of Mantegna's 'Calumny of Appelles' and the Milanese engraving after Leonardo's 'Last Supper' which emphasize his lifelong debt to Italian art from the *quattro cento* onwards. Generally his copies were less accurate transcriptions than original interpretations of some problem of communication or design which the work suggested to him. The subtle adjustments made in the Mantegna tell us a great deal about his attitude to form and classical arrangement.

During his youth he was momentarily led astray by Caravaggio's blatant essays in horror and surprise and in the 'Raising of Lazarus' (1632) the sister's startled gaze strikes a forced note: this was modified in the fifth state by a delicate weft of lines traversing the lower part of her head—a luminous shadow anticipating effects which later became one of his greatest expressive weapons.

Frequently Rembrandt's use of *chiaroscuro* is cited as one of his chief contributions to the development of art. But of course, other artists had been well aware of its potentialities before him; Tintoretto, Correggio, and Caravaggio had all exploited it with pronounced individuality. Rembrandt never allowed it to become stereotyped, and sensitively varied it according to the demands of his subject so that it did not degenerate into a convenient technical formula cloaking an underlying poverty of invention. In many of the drawings he eschews it, especially in the landscapes, and in the deeply affecting series of 'Abraham casting out Hagar and Ishmael'. Earlier it enhanced the sumptuous effects of his vain-

glorious temples; or a mass of towering darkened rock could impart an impression of drama which reflected a youthful need to grasp the outward signs of mood and excitement. Later the opposition and interaction of light and shade was neither dramatic in the instantaneous theatrical sense of the word, nor a purely romantic aureole of light enveloping a head, but a means to induce a sense of awe, an intimation of Divinity or supernatural effulgence.

The bearded head of the aged Simeon in the 1654 'Presentation in the Temple', completed more than twenty years after the Lazarus, is not only an area of light thrown into relief against the prevailing darks, its vivid radiance becomes significant of the spiritual revelation he has received. The light of Divine intelligence visibly illumines his countenance and the old man, previously worn and frail, is suddenly strengthened and erect. The erectness of the kneeling figure is enforced by the vertical lines of the attendant's staff, the device on its crest catching the light carries the movement upwards. Meanwhile the Virgin and St Joseph retire modestly and reverently into the shadow pondering upon the nature of the wonderful Child. There are other relatively light passages in the print but they are subsidiary means of unification of mood and form.

Again, as the children, a huddled shadowy group, gather about the 'Star of the Kings' their emblem becomes the focal point of the etching. The star remains contrived, a tinsel shape mounted on a pole objectively rendered, yet without destroying its character Rembrandt endows it with wider associations and it ceases to be just a bauble brought out of a chest for the annual feast. It is the only bright passage in the work, the other forms are scarcely distinguishable in the scant reflected light, even the surface of the star is cross-hatched and its brilliance reduced: its luminosity is all the more astonishing and springs from his unerring sense of tonal values. A stark uninterrupted white would have broken the subtly suggested identity between the group and their symbol.

At this time (from the later sixteen-forties to the middle fifties) he became increasingly pre-occupied with strong tonal contrasts which permitted a greater breadth of handling and formal simplification. The resultant drawings and etchings are often extremely moving, for instance the pen-and-wash of the 'Good Samaritan' where the light strikes the inert pathetic body of the

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wounded man being carried into the inn. The lantern is obscured by the horse's bulk and mysterious shadows play upon the walls. The fluid washes are controlled by the carefully considered accents; the sudden touches of white, the light unexpectedly glancing upon the bossy joints of the animal's legs; the guests at the inn peering out of the window, two dark blobs against the lighted interior.

He never achieved the same degree of pathos and drama in his earlier etching of this subject where an almost painful insistence on a cruder form of realism weakened the unity of the grouping. It is impossible to consider his graphic works without referring briefly to what can only be described as a periodic need for the hideous; almost incredibly ugly nudes bloated and misshapen, or tousled savage beggars demented and threatening in their rags. The recording of each physical imperfection is quite relentless and no trace of pity intervenes to mitigate and soften the cruel accuracy of the details. In their search for ideal beauty several of the Italian masters—Leonardo and Giorgione amongst them—became obsessed by antitypes of monstrous appearance to which at times they felt impelled to give concrete visual forms. Rembrandt's vagaries are less easily explained. His conception of beauty being more intimate, less demanding or exalted, would seem to preclude such violent oscillations. Thus they remain surprising and inexplicable, but an integral part of his vision. Nevertheless the section devoted to the life studies also contains some of his most tender and delicately observed renderings of the nude. The generalized, geometricized shapes of Italian classic nudes are the formal antithesis of Rembrandt's conception of form which stems from a less planimetric, more eventful and irregular surface movement and a sensitive, fugitive contour, so that the shapes are simultaneously emergent and elusive. His plastic sense is wonderfully demonstrated in the small details like the drawing of the sole of a foot in the exquisite late etching of a 'Woman with an Arrow'.

Of the large etchings at the British Museum the final version of the 'Three Crosses' reigns supreme. The plate, successively reworked, is a sublime meditation on the Crucifixion until in the seventh state the quintessential moment of consummation is attained: 'and darkness covered the face of the earth'. Its terrible umbrageous chaos seems to foreshadow an apocalyptic blackness.

Yet in the midst of the desolation Rembrandt dwells upon the promise, the Redemptive triumph of Calvary as the Centurion halts before the Cross recognizing our Lord's divinity. This equestrian figure taken from Pisanello's medallion of Francesco Gonzaga is a remarkable instance of another art form being completely absorbed into an utterly different context—a motif which has incidentally influenced Rouault too. The scale of the Centurion defies the laws of proportion and he achieves a symbolic importance which makes an academic deference to the demands of strict perspective irrelevant.

No other master has encompassed such a diverse range of subject matter and it has been impossible in a limited space to discuss either the portrait drawings and etchings or the landscapes where the superb economy of the pen drawings contrasts with the romantic intricacy of the etchings of storm-tossed trees. There are, too, the street scenes of beggars and rat-catchers or old men and women fondling small children. All these reappear throughout his life in his great *oeuvre* as a religious artist: the multitude gathered about Christ, the bewildered St Peter, the Old Testament narratives peopled by the inhabitants of the Jewish quarter of Amsterdam. Indeed, the diversity of his Biblical scenes can only find a parallel in certain Gothic manuscripts. He enjoyed the friendship of the celebrated Rabbis of the day and their exposition of the Old Testament undoubtedly contributed to the breadth of his interpretations which possess a resonance and ruminative quality which is somehow comparable to Dr Schweitzer's interpretation of Bach.

At the end of his life Rembrandt was a solitary and often lonely man, which perhaps gives an added poignancy to his spiritual conception which rests on an unshakable belief in God's direct communion with the individual soul; a truth which is implicit in such different scenes as Christ's miracles or the 'Sermon on the Mount' or the 'Abraham and Isaac'. The palpability of his representations does not arise from a desire for descriptive realism but from a passionate desire to externalize this interior process of divine intervention which can be the miraculous experience of the individual soul.