REMBRANDT AND THE HISTORICAL CONSTRUCTION
OF HIS CONSPIRACY OF CLAUDIUS CIVILIS

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For a Dutch seventeenth-century artist, a historical painting (historiestuk) is essentially a painting of a myth. The full knowledge of the texts and the sources is certainly useful. But the respect of the habit and the representative traditions is also extremely important. These ambiguous and sometimes contradictory goals give rise to an argument generally solved to the benefit of the mythical and traditional imagery rather than historical accuracy. As the theorist Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627–1678) underlines it, at the end of the Golden Century, “it is necessary to keep firmly to the truth or the verisimilitude, to represent only what exists or, at least, what may exist”, but since “the art of painting makes it possible to show various inventions and fables in a canvas… a painter had better keep to the feelings which are the most accepted by the historians and the poets”.¹ One striking example of these stakes and these difficulties with which the Dutch history painters were confronted, is the Conspiracy of Claudius Civilis painted by Rembrandt (1606–1669), for the stadhuys of Amsterdam, about 1661 (Fig. 1). This painting has a history, which initially deserves to be told.

November 28th, 1659: the burgomasters of Amsterdam decide to give to a former apprentice of Rembrandt, Govert Flinck (1615–1660), one of the most important orders of his career. The order was for twelve monumental canvases which would hang in one of the galleries of the new town hall (stadhuys) which was inaugurated four years earlier. The theme chosen for these canvases focussed on the revolt of the Batavians against the Romans, at the first century.² It is plausible that the patrons

Fig. 1. Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Conspiracy of Claudius Civilis*, ca. 1661, canvas, 196 × 309 cm, Stockholm, Nationalmuseum.