Rembrandt's Basket Arches

Jan Bialostocki

For many years already the attention of Rembrandt scholarship concentrates on the riddles posed by the subject matter of his works on one hand, and on the problems of authenticity and dating – on the other. Less attention has been paid recently to the study of the artist’s specific artistic language, to what we call his personal style. Drawings are probably better suited than pictures as material for observing the results of spontaneous decisions, taken possibly without or with little rational control. They sometimes reveal specific tendencies of the artist, his choice of favoured shapes, such as suited best his taste and his Kunstwollen. Therefore, in this short note, written in order to honour my good friend and colleague, Emil K. J. Reznicek, I shall concentrate on drawings, without however neglecting paintings altogether. I want to discuss a typical shape which appears once and again in Rembrandt’s drawn, painted and etched works and which therefore should be considered as one of his favoured forms.

There exists no recent study of architecture in Rembrandt’s imaginary world, although buildings which he represented are extremely original and very different from those he could observe both in his native Leiden and in Amsterdam, where he spent his mature life. Of course there exist drawings of actually known buildings or of such which existed at Rembrandt’s time – the fine drawing of the Westerkerk tower in the Amsterdam Historisch Museum, the visual record of the Amsterdam Town Hall destroyed by fire. We know also the always intriguing and not satisfactorily explained series of drawings representing English cathedrals, which – probably done after prints – reproduce the actually existing buildings.1 Thus in several cases Rembrandt followed forms of the constructed architecture. But most architectural backgrounds and elements of monumental character in Rembrandt’s works – palaces, temples, castles, town squares, bridges – are pure invention, a strange mixture of manneristic, Baroque, oriental or medieval motifs, which however produce a strikingly homogeneous whole, typical for the artist’s imagination.

I do not intend in this small contribution to take up the study of Rembrandt’s architectural forms in general, but I want shortly to discuss one feature only, namely his predilection for a specific form of the arch. Both establishing the outside format of his drawings – and sometimes paintings as well – and introducing architectural shapes into the represented space Rembrandt favours linear patterns of a very low arch, close to what is called ‘Basket arch’. It occurs throughout his career, but it seems to appear more frequently towards its later stages. Such an arch
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‘is formed by a segment of a large circle continued left and right by two segments of much smaller circles’.2

The shapes used by Rembrandt vary from something like one half of a, horizontally situated, oval – for instance in the outline of the architectural frame of the portrait drawing of a man of 1634 (coll. Ch. S. Payson, New York, fig. 1), in the painted framing architecture in the pair of portraits of 1641, that of Nicolaas Bambeeck (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Brussels) and that of his wife, Agatha Bas (Buckingham Palace, London) – to a very low, slightly curved line, for instance in such drawings like Homer reciting verses of 1652 (in the Six Collection, Amsterdam, fig. 2), or the Annunciation to the Shepherds from about 1655 (Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam).3 Sometimes – as in that last instance – the framing line cuts against the edge of the drawing at an angle and there exist several instances where Rembrandt uses such low segment arches without connecting them with the rest of the outline by the segments of small circles. Rembrandt’s liking for this kind of shape seemed to grow as he became older. In his early years, as he executed the series of Passion pictures for the Prince Frederik Hendrik (now at the Alte Pinakothek in Munich) he closed at the top their quadrangular fields with round arches. Such a shape appears in the drawing of Saskia with a hat, of 1633 (Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin-Dahlem), or – in painting – in his Self-portrait in the National Gallery, London, dated 1640.4 In later years however round arches practically disappear, or they appear very rarely, while the low basket arches become a frequent feature.

Also in many important paintings by Rembrandt low basket arches appear as architectural ornaments or motifs: in Dr. Tulp’s Anatomy Lesson of 1632, in the Tribute Money in Ottawa of 1629, in the so called Night Watch of 1642.5 Among the drawings the motif is too numerous for all the examples to be given.6 We shall limit our survey to a few characteristic examples.

It is symptomatic for Rembrandt’s taste that when he copied the drawing of the Entombment of Christ, attributed to Polidoro da Caravaggio, and known today from repetitions, in his drawing, today in the Teyler Stichting Collection, Haarlem, about 1655–60 (figs. 4 and 5), he lowered the round arch above the sarcophagus transforming it into a shape closer to the basket arch.7 In a drawing repeating a little later the same model the process went further on.8 In general, one can say that in the drawings assigned to the hands of Rembrandt’s pupils the motif favoured by the master appears also quite often, which reconfirms our conclusion that it must have been especially liked by Rembrandt.9

Very typical for this type of Rembrandt’s basket arch is the arch framing the composition of the drawing with the Angel disappearing before Manoah and his wife (in Stockholm), dated around 1655, considered to be a sketch for a new version of the Dresden picture of the same subject of 1641 (fig. 6).10 Although the picture in Dresden is quadrangular and horizontal in format, Rembrandt gave the new version a vertical dynamic form and closed it at the top with a low basket arch.