Rembrandt's Hidden Lovers

H. Rodney Nevitt, Jr.

Two etchings by Rembrandt van Rijn [1606-1669], *The three trees*, 1643 [fig. 1] and *The Omval*, 1645 [fig. 2], include amorous couples partially hidden in the foliage of the landscape. In *The three trees*, the minuscule lovers are barely visible sitting together in the dark vegetation in the right foreground, the man on the left en face, and the woman beside him in left profile [fig. 3]. Their somewhat larger counterparts in *The Omval* can be found in the shadowy undergrowth of the tree in the left foreground: again, the man on the left (his head obscured by his raised right arm) and the woman in left profile [fig. 4]. In both *The three trees* and *The Omval*, the near invisibility of the lovers encourages us to scrutinize them, despite the surrounding landscape that unfolds itself more readily to our sight. The present essay examines these etchings in the context of the amatory literature of the period—for example, songbooks—and the social customs such texts describe. Rembrandt’s hidden lovers are marginal details in these landscapes, yet they offer fresh insight into the broader concerns of his art.

*The three trees* combines certain characteristics of Rembrandt’s landscape etchings with others that are more typical of his landscape paintings. Though the location of the scene has never been identified (and perhaps was not meant to be), the landscape resembles the countryside around Amsterdam, the presence of which is suggested by the town in the left background. *The three trees* therefore evokes the local Dutch landscape that had become an important subject in Rembrandt’s drawings and etchings in the early 1640s. Yet it stands apart from these other images. Measuring 213 x 279 mm, it is the largest of Rembrandt’s landscape etchings and the most finished in execution. It is also distinguished by its turbulent sky and chiaroscuro which, as has often been observed, are more typical features of Rembrandt’s landscape paintings. The latter are generally less concerned with the local countryside than the drawings and etchings, and evince a more imaginary vision of nature. Two of the paintings, for example, juxtapose a low-lying area on one side with steep and distinctly non-Dutch hills on the other. In *The three trees*, Rembrandt subtly reconciles this composition with the flat landscape around Amsterdam; the looming highlands of the paintings become the embankment or dike on the right, a slight protuberance in the land that nevertheless takes on a rather imposing aspect because of the low viewpoint. In *The three trees* then, Rembrandt gives the local Dutch land-