Some Observations on Rembrandt and Lastman*

ONE can occasionally read that in recent years the importance of Pieter Lastman for Rembrandt’s artistic training has been overemphasized. With this claim I cannot agree. We are still a long way from realizing the full impact of Lastman’s art on Rembrandt’s; and this not so much with regard to the years during and immediately after Rembrandt’s short apprenticeship with the Amsterdam master as with regard to Lastman’s continued or rather renewed influence on Rembrandt after the latter’s removal to Amsterdam. In this paper I shall place my main emphasis on the importance of Lastman for Rembrandt’s art of the 1630’s and even later, and for the art of some of Rembrandt’s pupils.

Only a few words are needed here on the decisive share of Lastman in Rembrandt’s training when he was his teacher for a mere half year in Amsterdam, most probably in 1624. It is well known that Rembrandt borrowed a considerable number of details from the most recent paintings of his teacher: the horseman in the Basel Return of David of 1627 from Lastman’s Coriolanus of 1622 in Dublin, the ass in the Cognaq-Jay Balaam of 1626 from Lastman’s picture of the same subject, also of 1622. Furthermore, these early paintings by Rembrandt are profoundly indebted to Lastman in terms of color; they are indeed often as multicolored as are Lastman’s models, even though leanings toward greater emphasis on values are already noticeable. And over and above these strong outward connections we must of course always be aware of the fact that it was Lastman who had persuaded Rembrandt to become an historical painter in the first place and to remain one permanently—a painter of stories from the Bible and from ancient history which were represented factually, pointedly, dramatically, in complete contrast to the sophisticated, circumlocutory interpretations of the mannerists.

It is also well known that there exist four chalk drawings by Rembrandt (Fig. 1) in which he copied paintings by Lastman (Fig. 2) and that these four copies do not belong to the period immediately after Rembrandt’s apprenticeship. They cannot be dated with absolute certainty. True, one of them bears in back an inscription by Rembrandt which refers to works by himself and by two of his pupils in the mid-thirties: Ferdinand Bol and Leendert van Beyeren; but it can be argued that these notes, in black

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* This paper was read at the 57th Annual Meeting of the College Art Association of America held in Boston, January, 1969, session on ‘Rembrandt: Tradition, Innovation and Impact’ (Chairman: Seymour Slive).

1. Most strongly expressed by Vitale Bloch in Oud-Holland, lxi, 1937, p. 52. See also H. Gerson in Bulletin des Musées et Monuments Lyonnais, iii, 1962, no. 4 (unpag.), note 8; however, the same author takes a considerably different view of Lastman—to my great satisfaction one much nearer the one here presented—in Rembrandt Paintings, Amsterdam—New York, 1968, pp. 18ff. and 94.


4. Ibid., pp. 61ff. and 97 ff.


6. For the text of the inscription see Benesch no. 448.
chalk, were added later. The dates assigned to the drawings vary from the very beginning of the thirties to ca. 1637, but on general stylistic grounds the latter date is definitely too late. The early thirties are clearly acceptable; in any case the drawings must belong to Rembrandt’s Amsterdam period, when his new interest in Lastman’s art became apparent in many other ways. The date 1633 was formerly suggested because that was the year of Lastman’s death, and it was assumed that Rembrandt made these copies on the occasion of the dispersal of Lastman’s estate after his death in that year. However, as Kurt Freise pointed out many years ago in his still indispensable monograph, there was—just to cite one example—no Susanna in Lastman’s inventory of 1632 and thus presumably not in his estate of 1633 either. But it is certainly significant that all of the four Lastman pictures which Rembrandt copied date between 1612 and 1614 (the Dismissal of Hagar and Joseph Distributing Corn are of 1612, Paulus and Barnabas at Lystra and the Susanna of 1614) and can be expected to have been in the hands of Amsterdam patrons or collectors in the early thirties when Rembrandt studied them.

But these dates also prove another important point. While the apprentice Rembrandt of ca. 1624 utilized Lastman pictures of the early twenties, i.e., those most recently completed when Lastman was his teacher, the independent Amsterdam master Rembrandt harked back to Lastman pictures of the period 1612–1614; and what he found absorbing in them was not their color nor some special details but their total composition which he preferred to adapt for himself in drawings (in red or black chalk). Lastman was still a great and indispensable model for him, and although it has often been remarked that these drawings are to a degree free (‘creative’) copies, Lastman’s pictures were still Rembrandt’s direct and unmistakable sources. He considered each of these paintings with great care, but I should like to add that not all of Rembrandt’s slight modifications are necessarily outright improvements, although they have been invariably been interpreted as such—partly because there is some reluctance to find any fault with Rembrandt, and partly because the strange underestimation of Lastman’s art which one finds in the only monograph dedicated to him has had a long life. Are the new stance of the elder on the right in Rembrandt’s Susanna (Fig. 1) and the diminished distance of the other elder from Susanna really so preferable to the eager approach of the one and the stealthy creeping up of the other in Lastman’s painting (Fig. 2)?

These adaptations from Lastman by the Rembrandt of the early to mid thirties must be considered from the viewpoint of the artistic needs of Rembrandt in those years. Where else could he have turned for inspiration in the field of biblical and historical painting after he had moved to Amsterdam in 1631/32? He had not been in Italy; it was Lastman with his echoes of the Carracci, Domenichino and their circle, but also of Raphael and of the Bassani, who personified for him those Italian elements which he did not absorb through the study of the Utrecht Caravaggists or prints after Rubens. There was practically nobody else in Amsterdam at that time who could have offered such enlightenment; as Willem Martin said many years ago, ‘if one can speak anywhere of a decay of historical painting in

7. Benesch nos. 446-449.