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## Rembrandt: Turn of the Key

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—*In memory of Leonid Matsikh*

THERE ARE many mysteries and much contradictory evidence surrounding Rembrandt's life. Why was Rembrandt, the ninth of ten children, the only one to be enrolled in Latin school? Around age fifteen, why was he then pulled out to apprentice as a painter with Jacob Isaacz van Swanenburg? Why was Swanenburg, whom we would call a second-rate artist, chosen as a teacher? How did Rembrandt, the son of a miller, cross paths with Constantijn Huygens, one of the most erudite people in the Netherlands and a secretary to Stadholder, prince of Orange? How did Rembrandt, a newcomer to Amsterdam and only in his mid-twenties, become one of the most famous and sought-after artists almost overnight? And why did he then have to declare bankruptcy in 1656, dying in near poverty, abandoned by most of his students and prior collectors? Most of these questions have been dealt with by puzzled art historians in one way or another. Each of their hypotheses often contradicts the other—and in some cases, Rembrandt's history is constructed solely from guesses. The actual evidence of his biography is largely based on two sources, the first of which is a 350-word account by Jan Jansz from 1641, part of his Leiden city guidebook.<sup>1</sup> Even this contemporary description of Rembrandt's career is full of generalities and subjective interpretations.

The other famous source of facts about Rembrandt is the exhaustive bankruptcy list of his possessions, which, though it tells us a lot of details about Rembrandt's private life, is full of gaps when it comes to explaining his work. Titles of Rembrandt paintings were attributed posthumously, with paintings often being revisited on numerous occasions with diametrically opposing theories and subject attributions. Such is the case with

the great late painting of *St. Bartholomew*, whose identity morphed over the centuries from assassin, to doctor, to cook, and finally to apostle. Many subjects remain in question, as in the famous example of *Night Watch*—which is actually not a night scene. Rembrandt himself seemed either not to be concerned or was purposefully cautious about leaving any written document about his life or artistic practice. Paradoxically, he left more

autobiographical paintings than any artist of his time, including over seventy self-portraits and numerous painted, drawn, or etched images of his wife, children, and companions—as H. Perry Chapman appropriately calls him, “a self-portraitist of unmatched power.”<sup>2</sup> In addition, Rembrandt used his signature as another method of self-insertion—when signed, his presence was always proudly asserted. Over the years, he continually revised and honed a particular way of signing his work. By 1632, he had dropped all of the auxiliary information such as his hometown, his last name, and the reference to his father to focus primarily on what makes him unique, which he represented with his first name alone. Let us begin our investigation into Rembrandt’s mysterious contradictions with an examination of his signature.

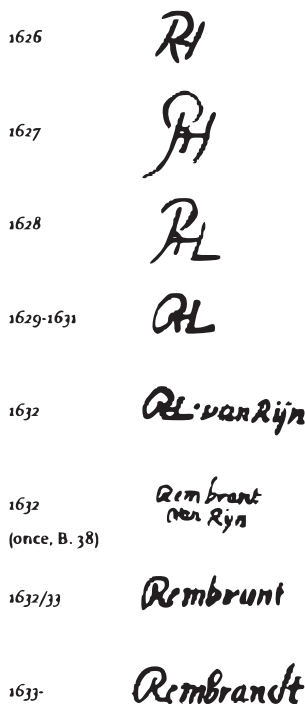


Fig. 1

## I. “D” FOR . . . ?

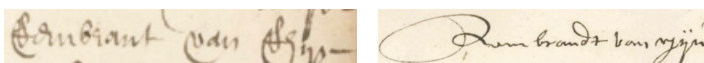
SOMETIME IN THE early 1630s (probably around 1633), Rembrandt made a significant change to his identity that, mysteriously, remained uncommented upon by his contemporaries. For some reason, he added a letter “d” to his first name, changing Rembrant to Rembrandt (fig. 1). Despite the large number of paintings and etchings signed with this modified first name,

most of the documents that mention him during his lifetime retain the original “Rembrant” spelling. An interesting comparison is presented by a legal document from 1665 that was drawn up by Titus in which Rembrandt’s name lacks the letter “d” in the body of the text, yet prominently displays it in the fancy signature by Rembrandt at the bottom (fig. 2). While scholars have noted the change in the spelling of Rembrandt’s name, they have not offered an explanation to account for it. To explore the reasons behind Rembrandt’s new identity, first, let’s consider the etymology of the name “Rembrant.” It derives from a Germanic name containing the word “sword.” Some scholars explain Rembrandt’s appearances with a sword in his paintings as indicative of the meaning of his name. By adding the extra letter, though not making a phonetic change, the meaning of the word was altered. The name can be divided into two distinct words: “Rem” and “brandt” (in a number of his signatures after 1632, Rembrandt emphasized this duality by either capitalizing the letter “B” in the middle of his name or literally separating the word into two: Rem brandt). In Dutch, “Rem” stands for “brake” (or “obstruct”) and “brandt” translates as “fire” (or “light”). The combination of these two words “rem” and “brandt” creates a wordplay that means “obstructed light.” In fact, whenever Rembrandt’s name is mentioned, one of the first associations with his art is the mastery of light and dark. The radiant light that illuminates his canvases, panels, paper, and copper prints, is accentuated by rich, dense, and velvety areas of darkness or obscurity. Thus, Rembrandt’s revised name becomes a pun reflecting the quintessential ability of creating illuminated darkness or “dimmed light.”

Additionally, in Western esoteric tradition the letter “d” carries important connotations. It evokes the word “Deus” meaning “God”—but at the same time, as Antoine Faivre points out—“A principle of knowledge, an organ of the soul, called the ‘Light of Nature,’ reveals the *magnalia Dei*. . . . The task . . . of the people . . . is to learn how to receive this ‘Light of Nature’ in themselves.”<sup>3</sup> Rembrandt’s modification of his first name is indicative of his understanding of this con-

cept and reflects his artistic identity as both receiving and reflecting the light of nature through his art. Furthermore, Rembrandt repeatedly added a beautifully rendered letter “f” after signing his name. Scholars have interpreted this to mean “fecit” or “made by.” A master of multiple meanings, Rembrandt may have enjoyed the potential of this letter to also evoke the word “frater” or “brother.” Thus his signature would be read as “Rembrandt, fraternally,” or “Rembrandt, brother,” implying his belonging to a closed fraternal society.

There is another piece of evidence in support of the use of this abbreviation. Albert C. Mackey, in his *Encyclopedia*



Figs. 2ab

of *Freemasonry and its Kindred Sciences*, recorded: “Abbreviations of technical terms or of official titles are of very extensive use in Freemasonry. . . . A Masonic abbreviation is distinguished by three points . . . in a triangular form following the letter.”<sup>4</sup> It was a unique form of coded communication by which one Freemason signaled to other Brothers. Mackey goes through the

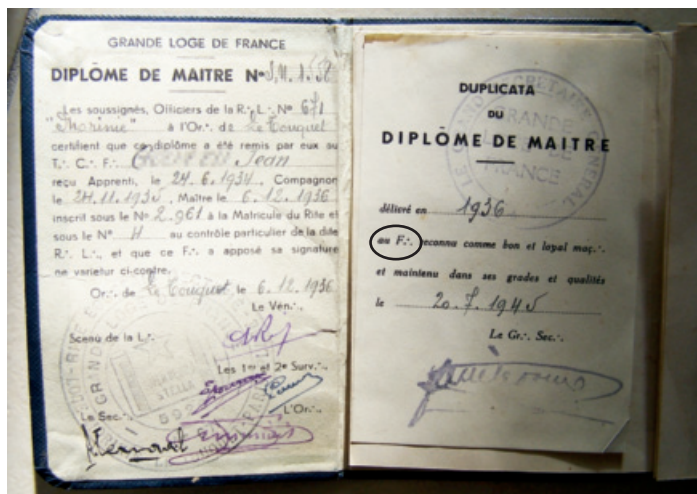


Fig. 3

Figs. 4ab



list of known abbreviations in which “f” stands proudly for “Brother,” as can be seen in a document from Grande Lodge of France (fig. 3). Jacques Huyghebaert in “Three Points in Masonic Context” specifies that this triple punctuation “also appeared in signatures, which explains why Freemasons are still called in French: ‘Les Frères Trois Points.’”<sup>5</sup> Looking at a great number of Rembrandt’s signatures, three dots in a triangular pattern can indeed be visible following the letter “f” (fig. 4). This type of public display that nonetheless remained invisible to the uninitiated seemed to appeal to Rembrandt, and we will see it again with his approach to self-portraits as well as the encoding of his name within the artwork.

## 2. “. . . LET THERE BE LIGHT”

WHAT WAS THE impetus behind Rembrandt’s obsession with creating the illusion of illumination? It is hard to disassociate the subject of light in art, following the innovations by Renaissance masters such as Leonardo and Titian and culminating in the technical virtuosity of *chiaroscuro* in Caravaggio. What lies beyond the visual illusionism of dark backgrounds accentuating luminous characters which seem to break free from the two-dimensional surface? Light has been used as a visual symbol of divinity, spirituality, creativity, knowledge, truth, purification, and birth across time and in cultures like those of ancient Egypt and Greece, as well as in Judeo-Christian traditions. There is, though, another important scheme of thought that should be explored in connection with *chiaroscuro*: inspired both by kabalistic and Christian symbolism, light is of great importance in Masonic rituals.<sup>6</sup> It represents the divine

truth and is believed to be a guiding principle that points the way for one's life pilgrimage. No wonder that Goethe, a brilliant writer as well as a Freemason, is believed to have uttered "*Mehr Licht*" (more light) as he was dying.<sup>7</sup>



Fig. 5

Obviously there can be no light without darkness. The shadow, or obscurity, serves as an important stage for the backdrop of illumination. Consider the story of Genesis 1:1-3: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light." Following this concept of creation, one of the most significant rituals of the initiation into the Brotherhood of Freemasons is the placement of the blindfolded candidate into a coffin.<sup>8</sup> After a period of time which gave the initiate a chance to reflect on the mysteries of life and death, the coffin was opened and the candidate was led through a series of corridors that symbolized passing through the birth canal, culminating in the removal of the blindfold in an intensely illuminated room. This ceremony would both metaphorically and psychologically simulate a second birth, an emotional and intellectual resurrection from darkness to light. To follow Goethe's famous line from *Götz von Berlichingen*, Act I (1773): "There is strong shadow where there is much light." In Masonic images, moreover, this duality is often represented by black-and-white checkered floors. Was Rembrandt merely following in the footsteps of the *Caravaggisti*,<sup>9</sup> who were imitating the rapidly spreading contagious formula of extreme *chiaroscuro*; or was he contemplating the symbolism and mysteries of the necessary polarities beyond the technique (fig. 5)? Consequently, was the self-imposed silent letter "d" in his first name added to signify the extremes of light and dark, a hint for the initiated?<sup>10</sup>

## 3. "KNOW THYSELF"

JUST AS IN his preoccupation with light and dark, Rembrandt's ongoing practice of self-portraiture is also akin to the Masonic philosophy of self-realization. Unlike most organized groups, Freemasons strive for the cultivation of individuality rather than adjusting to fit in with the preexistent structure. Each member's task is to cultivate and "polish" oneself, a process akin to polishing a rough stone to smooth perfection. This undertaking involves not only striving to perfect oneself and thus realizing full potential, but understanding one's personal limitations. The concept of initiating change in the world by changing oneself is at the basis of the Masonic way of life.

No wonder Masonic philosophy appealed to such great and independent minds as Voltaire, Mozart, and Goethe. Few painters have practiced the task of scrupulous self-examination as much as did Rembrandt. In just four years, between 1627 and 1631, he portrayed himself at least 20 times. As mentioned earlier, he painted, etched, and drew his own likeness at least 75 times over 40 years in an as-



Fig. 6

tonishing number of roles, ranging from a street beggar to the Apostle Paul. Over time, one can observe the pretenses of an aspiring court painter being stripped away from the aging artist, allowing a more private and vulnerable self to come forward. This impulse of self-examination has been variously interpreted—as the practice of the humanistic tradition, as vanity, or a self-marketing tool, or even as a response to actors' exercises (fig. 6). However, it is important to consider Rembrandt's extraordinary contribution to self-portraiture in a new light, as it bears strong resemblance to the Masonic task of ongoing self-examination.

## 4. ARE YOU LOOKING AT ME?

WHAT LIES BEYOND the face in Rembrandt's self-portraits? There are often multiple metaphors in seventeenth-century Dutch painting. We know to look behind ordinary objects to read a deeper meaning or to take away a moral lesson. Gestures, clothes, backgrounds, poses, direction of gaze, and colors can all be indicative of a meaning that the artist is conveying to the viewer. Unfortunately, over time, these messages frequently are misread or overlooked. Often, myths



Fig. 7

attach themselves to paintings over the centuries. The heart of the matter, however, usually lies in a deceptively basic observation of the work of art. Let's take a closer look at *Rembrandt's Self-portrait* (1636–38), now in the Norton Simon Museum (fig. 7). At first glance it's a rather traditional bust-length portrait. Rembrandt portrays himself in an artist's beret, with a penetrating gaze, which can be said to be either examining the viewer or, in contrast, drilling through his own image in the mirror. One barely detects the hint of a hand hidden in the lapel of the jacket. The *chiaroscuro* effect illuminates the face, inviting the viewer to scrutinize the persona as it obscures the hand gesture, making it easily unnoticeable. Remember that it is from the dark that knowledge is born. This gesture may look familiar. Compare Rembrandt's self-portrait (either the painting or a related etching from 1638) to a portrait of George Washington from 1776 by Charles Willson Peale (fig. 8). The gesture is identical. In the



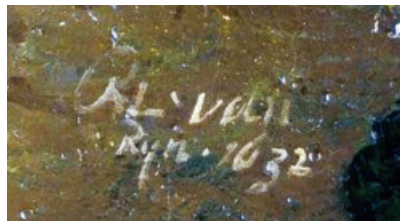


case of Washington (who was a Freemason), we know exactly what it represents. The “hidden hand” is found in the rituals of the Royal Arch Degree of Freemasonry<sup>11</sup> and communicates Masonic membership to other initiates. The hidden fingers also represent an internal disposition of faith illustrated by the Masonic diagram of this concept. Is the hiding of the hand in Rembrandt’s self-portrait actually a way of revealing an important message?

Figs. 8abc

##### 5. WRITTEN IN STONE . . .

ONE ASPECT OF Rembrandt’s preoccupation with self-examination spills over to his unorthodox treatment of the signature. His signatures go beyond the basic purpose of claiming authorship and can be seen as an extension of self-representation or self-insertion. Most often the placement of his signature deliberately directs the viewer’s attention to the key aspects in his work, for example, at the bottom of the feet of Christ in his *Jesus on the Cross* from 1631, on a garment supporting the carried child by the eagle in *The Abduction*



Figs. 9ab



Fig. 10

of *Ganymede* (1635), and on the pedestal in *Aristotle with a Bust of Homer* from 1653 (fig. 9). In addition, Rembrandt insistently adds his name to stone surfaces, for example, at the base of a column in the painting of *Samson Threatened his Father-in-law*, and in the rough stone in *The Abduction of Europa*.

In Masonic ritual and legend, stone (as one might expect) plays a leading role. Beginning with the new apprentice, who is entrusted with polishing the rough stone with hammer and chisel, and culminating in the variously shaped stones appearing in the Master Mason Degree, there is hardly a ceremony in freemasonry that is not connected in some way with stone. It is noteworthy that after completion of the initiation ceremony, the new Brother is placed in a particular position within the Lodge and is usually told that he represents the cornerstone on which freemasonry's spiritual Temple must be built. Additionally, when joining Royal Arch Masonry, the initiated is asked to create a signature "mark" which serves as a personal identifier carved into stone. On numerous occasions, Rembrandt places the signature in his paintings as if written on stone for the viewer to ponder. It is important to acknowledge this deliberate choice, which goes beyond utilitarian use of the signature for identification purposes of the artist's work.

## 6. OPEN SESAME . . .

ANOTHER TYPE OF authorship can be seen in the form of "I"-witness in Rembrandt's famous *Danaë* (fig. 10). This masterpiece marks one of the first instances in which the artist

presents himself in the act of creation within the depiction of a mythological scene. In the background, one can actually detect Rembrandt, wearing his signature beret and holding brushes and a palette perpendicular to his body, suggesting that the paint is still wet (fig. 11).

It is surprising enough to discover Rembrandt inserting himself into a mythological painting as both the creator and a witness of the scene.<sup>12</sup> Even more intriguing is the combination of the artist's tools of the trade he is holding in his right arm—the palette and brushes together with the keys. There

is no literal door to be opened in this painting. Rather, these keys are suggestive of an intellectual and perhaps a spiritual door that can be opened by and for the viewer. Setting the obvious story aside, the myth of Danaë is also an allegory of the boundless reach of divinity. While Danaë is locked away in a tower, God/Jupiter finds a devious way of entering the room in the form of a golden shower (in Rembrandt's interpretation this is represented by a golden luminous stream of light invading the scene from above). The keys traditionally symbolize a means by which secrets are obtained. Here we are invited by the artist to enter the sanctum sanctorum along with the divinity. Once again, we encounter an essential code in Freemason culture: the key as a symbol for unlocking the truth.<sup>13</sup>

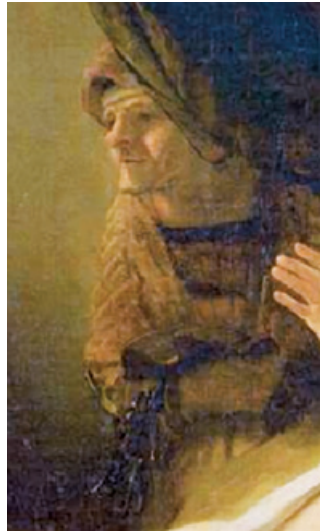


Fig. 11



Fig. 12

One more hint to consider. The shackled cupid in the background of the painting has served as a source of debate (fig. 12). The accepted



Fig. 13

interpretation was made by Erwin Panofsky, who claimed that it represented Danaë's chastity (though hard to reconcile with Danaë's welcoming attitude towards the intrusion). It is interesting to observe what happens if we continue to apply a Masonic lens. To Freemasons, Cupid represents secrecy, based on the idea that love should be practiced in private.<sup>14</sup> By adding handcuffs to Cupid, the symbol of privacy, is Rembrandt implying that secret knowledge is being exposed publicly? As viewers we are observing a nude woman on whom,

according to the myth, no one was to cast eyes. Simultaneously, are we becoming privy to sacred and secret Masonic symbols (i.e., the key, the streaming light, the proximity of the artist to God as creator) that have been embedded by the artist? Is Danaë the center of this drama or is Rembrandt placing a seductive woman here as a distraction from another meaning?

#### 7. ALL ROADS LEAD TO . . . ?

REMBRANDT HAD VARIOUS sources for his esoteric quest. One of them was his fascinating involvement with Menasseh Ben Israel, or Manoel Dias Soeiro, who was a Portuguese rabbi, cabalist, scholar, writer, printer, publisher, and founder of the Hebrew printing press in Amsterdam in 1626. Rembrandt borrowed concepts from the kabala for numerous paintings and prints, such as *Belshazzars Feast*, and it is speculated that he had access to esoteric symbols through Ben Israel.<sup>15</sup> There was more evident collaboration when Ben Israel commissioned Rembrandt to create four illustrations for his publication *Piedra Gloriosa* (*Glorious Rock*)—*David and Goliath*, *Daniel's Vision of Four Beasts*, *Jacob's Ladder*, and *The Image Seen by Nebuchadnezzar*, published in 1655. In combination, we have the glorified rock (the

subject of this volume and one of the most important symbols for Freemasons), the borrowing from the kabala, and the geometric solution that is used to represent the relationship between God and men. All four images are strongly indicative of Masonic preoccupations. Specifically, I would like to focus attention on *Daniel's Vision* (fig. 13). Here we ought to look for: (1) concentric circles surrounding the divine figure at the top; and (2) a compass shape spreading from the oculus, a symbol of divinity, pointing down to the Earth.

These two geometric applications are closely reminiscent of a key Masonic concept describing God as *The Great Architect*. The basic tools of measurement, a pair of compasses and the square, are considered the main two symbols of sacred geometry. Further, the circle as a product of the compass becomes a symbol of the divine and the creative.<sup>16</sup> It is noteworthy that the compass lines radiating from the oculus and the God figure at the top reach all the way to the ground to touch Rembrandt's signature (fig. 14). Rembrandt thus underlines the connection between the two creators in this image—God and the Artist. It is also fascinating that when the book was reprinted a different artist was commissioned (most likely unbeknownst to Ben Israel) to copy



Fig. 14

Rembrandt's etchings. While *Daniel's Vision* was replicated, it was altered by deleting the image of God and the compass lines. Was Rembrandt's visual solution too controversial?

## 8. MIRROR,<sup>17</sup> MIRROR ON THE WALL . . .

GOING A STEP FURTHER, Rembrandt's famous print *The Alchemist* (c. 1652), which has been ascribed various titles (including *Faust*), is even more daring. It presents a visual riddle based on a synthesis of three sources: Christianity, Kabala, and Alchemy (fig. 15). A man draped in what appears

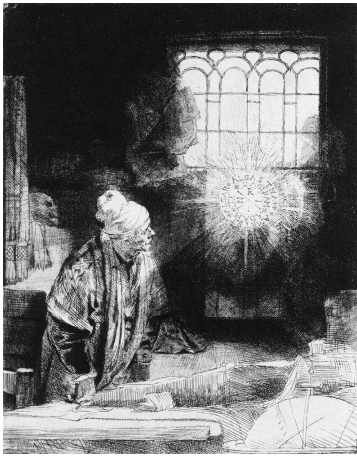
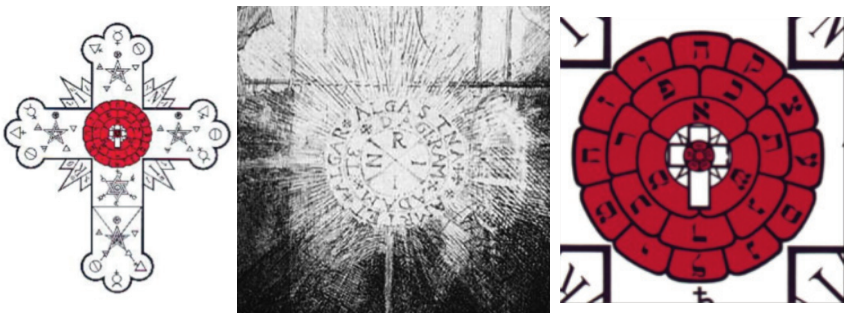


Fig. 15

to be a *tallit* (a Jewish prayer shawl) rises and turns towards the window. A radiating disk surrounded by three concentric circles appears in mid-air, obscuring a figure holding and pointing into a mirror. This levitating vision bears a secret inscription, which has been de-coded by using a mirror and deciphering the Latin anagram to read as Hebrew words that spell the name of God.<sup>18</sup> The middle of the roundel bears a cross dividing

it into four sections with the letters *INRI* (from New Testament: *Iesus Nazarenus, Rex Iudaeorum* or Jesus Christ, King of the Jews). However, the letters have been rotated with the “R” residing prominently at the top, spelling *RIIN* clockwise.<sup>19</sup> Riin is an equivalent way to notate Rembrandt’s last name Rijn, since in Dutch the capital letters “I” and “J” can be written identically.<sup>20</sup> Rembrandt also added a clever and daring spin to the abbreviation of the letter “R” from *Rex* (or King), identifying himself by either first or last name: “R” for Rembrandt or “R” for “Rijn.”

In alchemy and according to the kabala, the mirror reflects the image of God. The world can be seen as God’s mirror.<sup>21</sup> As we have seen, Rembrandt was intimately acquainted with the mirror through countless self-portraits. His work can be seen as an extension of another mirror in reflecting both Rembrandt and the Divine. Once again, Rembrandt imbeds his presence while also aligning the artist with the carrier of light and secret knowledge. The presence of the skull, globe, books, and the mysterious writing embedded in the roundel of the apparition has led scholars to see the scene as the vision of the alchemist. Consider a striking new juxtaposition. Compare the Rosicrucian Cross (also prevalent in Masonic symbolism)<sup>22</sup> to Rembrandt’s image of the vision—you will find the three concentric circles, the cross in the middle, He-



Figs. 16abc

brew letters spelling God, and the letters INRI (fig. 16).

In *People of the Book: Christian Identity and Literary Culture*, David Lyle Jeffrey stresses the interest that Goethe, as a Freemason, had in this particular print by Rembrandt. In fact, Goethe went so far as to obtain “a reproduction, illustrating with it his 1790 first edition of *Faust*.”<sup>23</sup> Jeffrey suspects that the *Alchemist’s* alternate title, *Doctor Faustus*, was probably inspired by this association. Further, Jeffrey concludes, “The light symbol which comes through the window does have significance for Freemasonry.”<sup>24</sup> In addition to the Christian interpretation of the letters INRI signifying Christ, Jeffrey adds that “for Masons this came to signify rather *Ignis Natura Renovatur Integra*—suggesting the sacred fire of Masonry that renews humankind naturalistically.” Goethe obviously saw something more than just a collectible item in this mysterious etching by Rembrandt.

Rembrandt had one more source for esoteric knowledge. Thomas E. Rassieur, in his essay on Rembrandt’s printmaking techniques, mentions the artist’s “reuse [of] plates previously worked by other printmakers.”<sup>25</sup> He explains that usually “Rembrandt purchased new plates, for those that already bore an etched or engraved image usually cost more.” Out of the two known exceptions, Rassieur describes the first as Rembrandt’s “frugal recycling of an out-of-date mathematical diagram no longer having commercial value.” Fate has it that this copper plate survived and is now housed at the Rijksmuseum (fig. 17). It is on the verso of the plate for the

famous 1636 *Return of the Prodigal Son*. Careful observation reveals a squaring-of-the-circle diagram.<sup>26</sup> This mathematical problem has puzzled great minds, including Leonardo da Vinci, over centuries. Contemplation of this problem remains an important practice for Freemasons today, though since 1882 it has been proven to be an impossible task. For Freemasons one's daily work includes



Fig. 17

the striving to comprehend the divine plan, with the understanding that such comprehension will never be possible. This oxymoron is reflected in the problem of the squaring of the circle. The goal is not to solve it, but to practice creative thinking. We know that Rembrandt spent an enormous amount of money on collecting other artists' work. It is too soon to jump to the conclusion that he may have purchased this plate out of frugality. Rather, it gave him yet another source for a timeless esoteric geometric problem that may have resonated with his creative and philosophical endeavors.

## 9. THE CIRCLE OF TRUST

WHO WOULD HAVE appreciated such nuanced suggestions in Rembrandt's time? It is noteworthy that his first known commission of 1625, *The Stoning of St. Stephen*, came from Petrus Scriverius (Peter Hendrickz Schrijver), a fascinating and politically controversial figure and a friend of Willem van Swanenburg (Rembrandt's first teacher's younger brother), as pointed out by Gary Schwartz. A seventeenth-century portrait engraving by an unknown artist bears his name with an additional inscription "Lare Secreto" from the Latin for "Secret Home" (fig. 18). In describing Scriverius, Schwartz writes: "His album is enriched with drawings by three Haarlem artists he called friends [including] the imprisoned leader of [the] Rosicrucian movement Johannes



Torrentius.”<sup>27</sup> This is the first known connection between Rembrandt and a Rosicrucian supporter. Schwartz also observes an interesting “coincidence”: “Rembrandt left Leiden where his first master’s parental home adjoined that of Petrus Sciverius, for Amsterdam, where he moved in with his second master Pieter Lastman, next door to Geurt Dircksz (Scriverius’ cousin).” These facts point out an intricate network of connections leading to Rembrandt’s installment in Amsterdam and his early success. It is



Fig. 18

noteworthy that at the root of Rembrandt’s beginnings as an artist stands a man who was friends with a highly controversial Rosicrucian artist. It is also important to remember that Rosicrucianism was instrumental in the development of Freemasonry.<sup>28</sup> In 1928, Karl H. De Haas published a book in which he explored a geometric reconstruction of Rembrandt’s painting, *The Nightwatch*.<sup>29</sup> Following De Haas’ argument, in his article on Torrentius, George Taylor drew parallels between the work of Torrentius and Rembrandt, observing that there are similar geometric principles underlying the composition of their work that can be related to Rosicrucian symbols of the Order.<sup>30</sup> There is yet another link between Scriverius and Rembrandt—Joost van den Vondel, one of the greatest Dutch poets of the seventeenth century. There are a number of Rembrandt paintings that have been suspected of reflecting scenes from Vondel’s plays. One example is Rembrandt’s hard-to-identify history painting from 1626, which Schwartz suggests is *Palamedes before Agamemnon*, commissioned by Scriverius as a historical analogy supporting Remonstrants. Schwartz notes that just a year before, “Vondel published his play *Palamedes, or Innocence Mur-*

dered whose main characters . . . neatly match the major figures in the painting. . . . It lay in the line of expectation that Scriverius's clan would encourage Vondel to write *Palamedes*, and that Scriverius would commission Rembrandt to paint it."<sup>31</sup> Another match between the painter and the poet is Vondel's 1639 play *Gebroeders* (*Brothers*), staged in 1641, and Rembrandt's *The reconciliation of David and Mephiboseth* (1642). The main two subjects of the play and the paintings are not brothers by blood but by compassion and conviction—a theme that would fit well with the Rosicrucian or Masonic Brotherhood.

The inspiration worked both ways. Vondel's famous lines were written in response to Rembrandt's portrait of Cornelis Cllaesz Anslø: "O, Rembrandt, paint Cornelis' voice. The visible part is the least of him; the invisible is known only through the ears; he who would see Anslø must hear him."<sup>32</sup> The subject of invisibility is described by David Stevenson: "Masons, as many of the seventeenth-century references to the Mason word indicate, were not what they seemed, in that outsiders could not see anything distinctive about them which identified them as masons, but fellow initiates could

detect 'invisible' emanations which identified them."<sup>33</sup> Vondel, indeed, may have belonged to a secret group that would have preferred to stay invisible to the authorities. A seventeenth-century Rosicrucian caricature survives, etched by Pieter Nolpe,<sup>34</sup> with a verse below the image mentioning "a meeting of the brotherhood of the Red Cross" (fig.



Fig. 19

19). In this print, the clothing of two figures is decorated with a cross. And among those whose identities are suggested—Joost van den Vondel and Torrentius.<sup>35</sup>

#### 10. THE SECRET AGENT . . .

LET'S CONSIDER ONE more suspect. It has been widely accepted that Rembrandt was introduced to the Dutch Court by Constantijn Huygens, who was a secretary to the two Princes of Orange.<sup>36</sup> Huygens secured for Rembrandt a considerable number of commissions for the Prince's gallery in The Hague, including a five-part series of the *Passion of Christ*. Thus most art historians remark that Rembrandt's career was made overnight in his early twenties. We return full circle to the original question of just how and why the paths of a miller's son and that of one of the most brilliant and erudite courtiers came to cross. It seems that this meeting was not accidental. The choice of Jacob Isaacsz Swanenburg as Rembrandt's first painting teacher was not random; it was an attempt to establish connections at the court. Jacob's cousin had married into Huygens's family;<sup>37</sup> it, then, was only a question of time for the exceptionally talented student to be introduced to the art connoisseur.<sup>38</sup>

Who was Huygens beyond his official court identity? Here are some illuminating facts:<sup>39</sup>

1. One of Huygens' friends and correspondents was the famous Freemason Christopher Wren.<sup>40</sup>
2. Huygens collected rare treatises on Rosicrucianism and Kabbalism.<sup>41</sup>
3. He worked closely with operative Masons while designing his own house and contributing plans for the *Mauritshuis* in The Hague.<sup>42</sup>
4. Huygens was known for frequently describing God as "the Great Architect."<sup>43</sup>
5. In 1661, his son Christiaan paid several visits in London to Sir Robert Moray, a Scottish soldier, statesman, diplo-



Fig. 20

- mat, judge, spy, Freemason and philosopher.
6. Moray sealed his letters to both Huygenses, father and son, with a Masonic seal.<sup>44</sup>
  7. Visual evidence points to possible Masonic associations as well: in Huygens' impressive portrait by Thomas Keyser, the artist portrays him at his desk with Huygens' left hand prominently resting on a pair of compasses (fig. 20).

These facts allow us to revisit Huygens' great interest and early support of Rembrandt<sup>45</sup> in a new light (a fraternal bond based on Masonic<sup>46</sup> ideology?). Paradoxically, Rembrandt's success ended as abruptly as it started, in near poverty. If Huygens made Rembrandt's career, could it be Huygens who contributed to destroying it as well? An unexplained "falling out"<sup>47</sup> between the two friends was reflected by the ending of the court's patronage.<sup>48</sup> Was the disclosure of Masonic symbols in Rembrandt's painting the cause of the sudden withdrawal of support? Was Huygens afraid to be openly "discovered" for his Masonic ties at the court by his association with Rembrandt? In *Rembrandt His Life, His Paintings*, Gary Schwartz has presented the hypothesis that Rembrandt's ultimately unexplainable bankruptcy was political in nature.<sup>49</sup> To go only a step further, was Rembrandt's financial decline also tied to Huygens' "blacklisting"?

## I I. OH BROTHER . . .

AN IMPORTANT QUESTION remains: when did the Freemasons originate in the Netherlands? It is commonly accepted that official Freemason history began with the 1717 *Grand Lodge* in England. Naturally, so powerful an organization, unified under the Grand Lodge, was not born overnight. Its roots extend deep into the past. In his insightful book, *The Origins of Freemasonry*, David Stevenson observes that “without denying the importance of grand lodges in the spread and development of freemasonry, it is difficult to see the existence of a grand lodge as an essential of freemasonry, necessary before the latter term can be used.”<sup>50</sup> Stevenson provides a chart for pre-1710 Masonic lodges in Scotland with the earliest documented lodge, *Aitchison’s Heaven*, dating to 1599.<sup>51</sup> Such Masonic documents rarely survive prior to the eighteenth century. Though Holland was considered to be tolerant to the outsiders, in Rembrandt’s time one could still risk being jailed or even tortured for belonging to an unsanctioned organization. Consider the example of the Dutch painter known as Johannes Torrentius (earlier mentioned in connection with Scriverius), whose paintings were ordered to be burned, after he was accused of being a Rosicrucian, arrested (in 1627), and tortured in prison.

The Freemasons left behind other clues of their existence—predominantly in architecture. In the Netherlands, Jacob van Campen (1595–1657), an artist and an architect (and a friend of Constantijn Huygens), adopted Vitruvian principles (based on the work of Roman architect Marcus Vitruvius Pollio) to help design the Mauritshuis. To comprehend the importance of the Masonic implication, consider Stevenson’s evaluation: “Vitruvius’ concept of the architect was vital to the changing perceptions of the mason craft . . . which helped to lead to the emergence of freemasonry”; and again: “It would seem, then, that some men joined lodges through identifying masonry with *Vitruvian* concepts of architecture.”<sup>52</sup> In addition, van Campen’s work was influ-

enced by Christopher Wren, the English architect and Freemason (mentioned earlier), evidenced in the famous example of Nieuwe Kerk in Haarlem. Intriguingly, a Masonic Lodge under the name of Jacob van Campen was established in 1875 in Amersfoort (in the province of Utrecht) in honor of van Campen's symbolic legacy in architecture.

Van Campen is credited with the redesign of Rembrandt's house on Sint-Anthonisbreestraat around 1627–28. This addition included a new façade with a triangular pediment. A pediment including an oculus in the center is strongly evocative of Masonic architectural design. The delta triangle, which masons greatly revere, is a symbol of Freemasonry adopted from the Egyptians. Among its many profound meanings, it represents the presence of God as the Great Architect. Part of the importance of this symbol is that for the uninitiated it looks like an archetypal geometrical shape; but to the initiated, the sacred meaning is evident, for as Stevenson notes, "Playing the mason was being invisible."<sup>53</sup> This element in Rembrandt's house provides an interesting comparison when seen side-by-side with Masonic architecture (e.g., the 1866 Masonic Lodge of Dublin and the 1895 Masonic Temple in Canada; figures 21c and b).

The other clue for Masonic presence comes via publishing houses, sources of the easiest and most consistent method of



Figs. 21abc

communication. Books were the primary vehicles for reaching out, before and after the official 1717 Masonic formation date. In the Netherlands, The Plantin Press at Antwerp was one of the focal centers of the fine printed book in the sixteenth century. Christophe Plantin fled from Paris (where at least one printer had recently been burned at the stake for heresy) to Antwerp,

where he became a citizen and by 1555 began to print books. For over two hundred years, the Plantin press had a monopoly, granted by the papacy, for the printing of liturgical formularies; yet in 1562, suspected of heresy (Masonic/esoteric ties?),<sup>54</sup> Plantin fled to France for two years. After 1564, Plantin set up again in a new shop under the sign of *De Gulden Passer* or “The Golden Compasses” (also his printers mark).<sup>55</sup> Note the hand of God<sup>56</sup> in this design, which is holding a compass outlining an unfinished circle, with the motto *Labore et Constancia* (“By Labor and Constancy”).<sup>57</sup> Compare Plantin’s mark to the common Masonic logo—the compass always points down (fig. 22). The hand of God or a divine presence is usually represented by the letter “G” (God = Geometer) and/or by the Delta triangle. In addition, the motto of persistent or constant<sup>58</sup> labor summarizes one of the main duties of each individual Freemason: self-perfection and self-realization in the world. Thus the roots of what we would call today a brotherhood of Freemasons (I suggest we call them PGL Masons or Pre-Grand Lodge Masons) is detectable through visual culture in the Netherlands back to the mid 1500s.

## 12. . . . WHO IS THERE?

OUR INQUIRY INTO the secret world of Rembrandt may not answer every question here and now. Rather, by opening an esoteric umbrella, it provides a novel way of looking at his work and life. In conclusion, consider a new slant on the



Figs. 22ab



original set of questions in light of the Masonic tendencies that we have explored:

1. Did Rembrandt add an extra letter to his name in his signature to reflect his political or philosophical identity?
2. Who helped plan Rembrandt's career from his early teens?
3. What was the impetus behind the numerous self-examinations in his self-portraits?
4. Did Rembrandt's possible involvement in PGL Masonic circles play a part in his overnight success?
5. Did Rembrandt go too far in revealing fraternal secrets, which resulted in a falling out with his biggest supporter at the court, Huygens?
6. Finally, was Rembrandt's bankruptcy a consequence of the blacklisting resulting from his divergence with Huygens?

This series of questions marks the beginning of a long and exciting journey. Anyone can visit Rembrandt's house today. You do not need a special key to open the front door; just present a ticket to enter what is now a museum (fig. 23). Another entry awaits one prepared to use the key that Rembrandt left us through his work—are we ready to open that door?



Fig. 23

#### NOTES

AUTHORS NOTE: I would like to extend deep gratitude to those who encouraged and advised me throughout the research, writing, or editing process: Irina Gershman, George Gershman, Amy Golahny, Ineke Huysman, Harry Maslin, Evan Pepper, Christine Sellin, Paul R. Sellin, and John Slifko.

1. Gary Schwartz, *Rembrandt His Life, His Paintings* (New York 1985), 20.
2. H. Perry Chapman, *Rembrandt's Self-Portraits A Study in Seven-*



*teenth-Century Identity* (Princeton, NJ 1990), 3.

3. Antoine Faivre, *Western Esotericism A Concise History* (Albany, NY 2010), 40.

4. Albert G. Mackey, *Encyclopedia of Freemasonry and its Kindred Sciences* (New York and London 1914), 11.

5. Jacques Huyghebaert, *Three Points in Masonic Context*, as communicated by John Slifko

6. A. G. Mackey, *The Symbolism of Freemasonry, Illustrating and Explaining Its Science and Philosophy, Its Legends, Myths and Symbols* (New York 1882), chap. XXII.

7. This was probably derived from a longer version: "Open the window-shutters, that I may have more light" (*Macht die Fensterladen auf, damit ich mehr Licht become*).

8. Mackey (note 6), VI.

9. A term applied to painters who followed the conventions of Caravaggio's painting style, especially his dramatic lighting techniques, and were responsible for spreading his painting stylistic influence throughout Europe.

10. Traditionally a Freemason member is given a new name after the initiation. Perhaps this could be the reason for Rembrandt's need to differentiate the given name in addition to the newly established spiritual and artistic identity.

11. Malcolm C. Duncan, *Masonic Ritual and Monitor* (New York 1866), 237-38.

12. Zhenya Gershman, *Rembrandt: The "I" Witness, Arion* 19.2 (Fall 2011), 65-91.

13. Recueil Précieu, See *Ceremonies of the Masters Degree in the Adonhiramite Rite*, 87.

14. Charles Clyde Hunt, *Masonic Symbolism*, (Whitefish, Montana 1939), 326.

15. Steven Nadler, *Rembrandt's Jews* (Chicago 2003), 104-44.

16. This metaphor could be possibly applied to the famous riddle of the Kenwood *Self Portrait with Two Circles*. J. G. van Gelder ("Rembrandt en de zeventiende eeuw," *De Gids* 119 [1956], 408-9), suggested applying kabalistic signs interpreting the perfection of God to this painting.

17. The original meaning of the word mirror that was used by Kabalists was from Latin *miror* "wonder at."

18. Shelly Perlove and Larry Silver, *Rembrandt's Faith* (State College, PA 2009). 63-65.

19. This observation is partially described by Jean-Marie Clark in his collection of on-line essays *Rembrandt Signature Files*.

20. I am grateful to Dr. Christine Sellin for contributing to this observation.

21. Deni McIntosch McHenry, *Rembrandt's Faust in his Study Reconsidered: A Record of Jewish Patronage and Mysticism in Mid-Seventeenth-*

*Century Amsterdam* (Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin, Spring 1989, 15).

22. In *The Origins of Freemasonry* (Cambridge 1988), 96–105, D. Stevenson argues the importance of Rosicrucianism on the development of freemasonry.

23. David Lyle Jeffrey, *People of the Book: Christian Identity and Literary Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI 1996), 213.

24. Jeffrey (note 23), 213.

25. Thomas E. Rassieur, et al., *Rembrandt's Journey: Painter Draftsman Etcher* (Boston 2003), 46.

26. I am grateful to Boris Komarov for the identification of the diagram as the squaring of the circle.

27. Schwartz (note 1), 25.

28. Stevenson (note 22), 96–105.

29. K. H. de Haas, *Natuurwetenschappelijk Onderzoek Van Schilderijen* (Rotterdam 1928).

30. In his article on Torrentius, George Taylor (*Rosicrucian Beacon* 2.1 [March 2012], 19) writes: “The connection between Rembrandt and the Order, although perhaps tenuous on the surface, is reinforced by the fact that in the foreground of the *Nachtwacht*, a red rose was originally painted, though Frans Banning Cocq (who commanded the Company in the painting) later replaced it with an orange on the copy in the British Museum. It can also be shown that the geometrical basis of the composition of the *Nachtwacht* is founded on the aforementioned Rosicrucian symbols.”

31. Schwartz (note 1), 36–38.

32. From The British Museum, Portrait of Cornelis Claesz Anslo Drawing, inscribed verso, top left, on a remnant of the old mount in pen and brown ink.

33. Stevenson (note 22), 172.

34. *Satire met het schilderen van de Antichrist*, ca. 1650, Pieter Nolpe, 1623–1647, used as an illustration in the book, *De geest van Mattheus Gansneb Tengnagel*, Gerrit Jansz, (Amsterdam 1652), Rijksmuseum.

35. G. Taylor, 19.

36. Schwartz (note 1), 73: “When Rembrandt came his (Huygens’s) way, he saw in him an artist who could add great luster to the prince’s court. It can only have been Huygens who stimulated court patronage of Rembrandt.”

37. Schwartz (note 1), 23.

38. The fateful encounter with Rembrandt occurred in 1628, when Huygens travelled to Leiden, and is described in detail in Huygens’s diary.

39. Marsha Keith Schuchard, *Restoring the Temple of Vision: Cabalistic Freemasonry and Stuart Culture*, (Leiden 2002), 545.

40. The two letters can be found in Koninklijke Bibliotheek, *Briefwisseling van Constantijn Huygens 1608–1687*, uitgegeven door J. A. Worp, KA

48, fol. 19r and 5r, Deel 6, 274 and 356, number 6778 and 6954, dated December 31, 1670 and October 7, 1674. Of specific interest is the latter, asking Wren to serve as a reference at court for a Jewish scholar interested to give a presentation on the “curious model” of Solomon’s Temple.

41. “Huygens had been a friend of Torrentius. The Rosicrucian painter protected by Charles I. Some scholars argue that he was associated with Rosicrucian society in Holland,” S. Ackerman, *Rosse Cross*, 146, 224–25.

42. Katherine Fremantle, *The Baroque Town Hall of Amsterdam* (Utrecht 1959), 97–109.

43. There is a controversial Dutch tradition that Huygens belonged to a Masonic Lodge in 1637–38: see Schuchard (note 39), 545, and S. Ackerman (note 41), 146.

44. For further evidence on Moray’s contact with Dutch Masons see David Stevenson, *The Letters of Sir Robert Moray to the Earl of Kincardine*, 1657–73, (Aldershot 2007), 74–75: “The city had decided to build a grand new town hall. Moray was consulted about how it should be positioned on the chosen site, the market square. He advised that it should not be built on one side of the square, in line with other buildings, but free-standing, in the middle of the square, in forma quadrata, and that it should face west. The advice was accepted, and on 6 March 1659 the craft (guild) of steenmetzen (stonemasons) admitted Moray as a member, to qualify him for a grant of citizenship, which duly followed on the 10 March. Presented by the metselaars (bricklayers) craft, he was enrolled as a Brabant citizen of Maastricht. On 24 March the authorities formally thanked Moray who ‘at several times has been asked to engineer [some parts of] the new town hall and the place where it will be placed’.”

45. The following Huygens quote praising Rembrandt is an excerpt from the manuscript autobiography of Constantijn Huygens (1629–31): “Such I place against all the elegance that has been produced throughout the ages. . . I maintain that it did not occur to Protagenes, Appelles or Parrhasius, nor could it occur to them were they return to earth that (I am amazed simply to report this) a youth, a Dutchman, a beardless miller, could bring together so much in one human figure and express what is universal. All honor to thee, my Rembrandt.” Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague; published in *Oud Holland* (1891), translated by Benjamin Binstock. Art Humanities Primary Source Reading 29, section 7: Rembrandt.

46. While I am using the term *Freemasons*, Rembrandt’s involvement may also include groups that share similar ideologies drawing from the kabala and alchemy in seventeenth century Netherlands, specifically the Rosicrucians.

47. Schwartz (note 1), 73: “By April 1633, however, his (Huygens) enthusiasm had cooled off to freezing point. He wrote a series of perfectly insulting poems on Rembrandt’s portrait . . . For a few years Huygens was Rembrandt’s greatest admirer, and then he turned against him.”

48. P. Chapman, 103–4: “In 1647, the year after Frederk Hendrik had ordered the *Adoration* and *Circumcision* from Rembrandt, his name was omitted from a list, drawn up by Constantijn Huygens and the architect Ja-

cob van Campen, of painters to decorate the Stadholder's new palace, the Huis ten Bosch . . . After Flink's death he (Rembrandt) was commissioned to provide a single night scene for the town hall, *The Oath of Cladius Civilius*, which was removed within a year."

49. G. Schwartz addresses Rembrandt's bankruptcy in his two books on him. In *The Rembrandt Book* ([New York 2006], 43) he writes: "From 1650 on, Rembrandt's finances went from bad to worse. In a nightmarish decade, marked by an endless sequence of broken promises, evasive tactics and lawsuits, he lost his belongings, his house and the art collection that was so dear to him. He moved to a poorer neighborhood. . . . Valuable commissions continued to come in, but the once overfull studio in which Rembrandt trained his apprentices and gave expansive art lessons to amateurs became a lonely place." In his earlier study, *Rembrandt His Life, His Paintings* ([New York 1985], 283) Schwartz comments that though "there are about one hundred-and-twenty-five documents dealing with the problems" on the history of Rembrandt's insolvency, "archivists and art historians are not sure what really happened." Schwartz presented a theory that the bankruptcy might have been political in nature (287).

50. Stevenson (note 22), 215.

51. Stevenson (note 22), 234.

52. Stevenson (note 22), 106, 113.

53. Stevenson (note 22), 170.

54. It is known that Plantin was connected to the movement of Familists. Both Freemasons and Rosicrucians have a lot in common with Familists as we can see from the two sources below:

Elizabeth L. Eisenstein in *The Printing Press as the Agent of Change* ([Cambridge 1979], 140-41), noted: "We know that the great Antwerp printer Christopher Plantin was secretly a member of the Family of Love. . . . We know that the Family of Love was a secret society . . . which allowed its members to belong ostensibly to any religious denomination whilst secretly maintaining their affiliation with the Family. These attitudes of the Family . . . have something in common with Freemasonry." Margaret Anne Doody, in her chapter on Samuel Richardson (*Fiction and Knowledge*, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, John Richetti, ed. [Cambridge 1996], 95) highlights the Rosicrucian connection: "The sense of a certain internationalism, and a brotherhood beyond frontiers, connected with a new religious sensibility even to extent of creating in effect new sects, such as the "Family of Love" that grew around the Antwerp printer Christopher Plantin. The early Familists were printers; their beliefs were the inception of Rosicrucianism."

55. Dr. Leon Voet, *The Golden Compasses: The History of the House of Plantin-Moretus* (Amsterdam 1969), Vol. I, 31.

56. The detail from Rembrandt's *Belshazzars Feast* makes another curious juxtaposition; in this case, the hand of God produces a radiating circle of light.

57. Ron Heisler in his article "The Impact of Freemasonry on Elizabethan

Literature" (*The Hermetic Journal* 1990) noted a parallel symbol: "A drawing recently discovered in British Library Mss Harley 1927 f.76 verso. The manuscript belonged to Randle Holme III, the 17th century Chester freemason and herald. Showing a hand with a compass, and with the inscription of 'Constantia et labore,' it is drawn on a page with the dates '1621' and 'July 1639' on the back. Randle Holme III probably was the artist."

58. Stevenson (note 22) observed: "Further evidence of Sir Robert Moray's interest in symbolism is provided by a number of other symbolic seals he used. One shows a dice or a cube bearing a star on each face and the legend *CONSTANTIA*. Whichever way the dice fell, the symbol remained unchanged or constant" (178).

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2b. Titus' application to the magistrates for letters of recommendation (detail showing Rembrandt's signing his name as "Rem bradnt"), 3 June 1665, Den Haag, National Archives.

3. *Diplôme Maçonnique Français de 1945*, Grande Loge De France. © 2008 Christophe Dioux, used under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike license: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/legalcode>

4a. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Adam and Eve*, 1638, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

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16a. Rosy Cross, Francis King, 1975, *Magic—the Western Tradition, Art and Imagination series*, ed. Jill Purce, Thames and Hudson, London.

16b. Rembrandt van Rijn, *A Scholar in His Study* (detail showing the text in the roundel), 1650-54, Rijks-museum, Amsterdam.

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17. Rembrandt van Rijn, Verso of the etching plate for *The Prodigal Son*, c. 1636, Rijks-museum, Amsterdam.

18. Unknown artist, *Portrait of Petrus Scriverius*, ca. 1650, Royal Library, Netherlands.

19. Peiter Nolpe, *Satire met het schilderen van de Antichrist*, ca. 1650, Rijks-museum, Amsterdam.

20. Thomas de Keyser, *Portrait of Constantijn Huygens and his Clerk*, 1627, The National Gallery, London.

21a. Rembrandt's House (detail showing triangular roof), Rembrandthuis Museum, Amsterdam.

21b. Masonic lodge of Dublin (detail showing triangular roof), architect Edward Holmes, 1866.

21c. Masonic Temple in Canada (detail showing triangular roof), 1895.

22a. Christophe Plantin, *Labore et Constantia* Printer's Mark, Plantin-Moretus Museum, Antwerp.

22b. Masonic symbol of square and compasses, *Symbols of Freemasonry*, Daniel Beresniak, Assouline Publishing, 1998 .

23. Rembrandt's house (detail showing front door), Rembrandthuis Museum, Amsterdam.