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## Rembrandt: The “I” Witness

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—For George Gershman and Lena Matussovskaia

AND, THERE *he* was . . .

I could not believe my eyes. Rembrandt, standing in his own painting, and not just any painting, but one of his most revered: *Danaë* (fig. 1). I rub my eyes; I look again. There is no mistake (fig. 2): the famous brown beret with the white lining, the bulbous nose, and the etched wrinkle between the brows. I look at his hands—one raises the curtain as if to invite us in. The other holds the keys. Wait—what is the strange oval shape? No, it can’t be . . . I inspect more closely—it looks familiar to an artist. I have one of these oval shapes in my own studio: it’s a palette. I pick up a magnifying glass to get a better look, and I see—he is clutching brushes.<sup>1</sup>

I take a breath, I dial. I am on the phone with my parents: “Quick, Google Rembrandt’s *Danaë* painting.”

“Look—the person in the background—it’s Rembrandt.” They gasp. My mother, after a moment of excitement: “Surely, someone has seen this before?”

Now years have passed. I have read virtually every book and article written on this painting, and the answer to my mother’s question is, “No.” *No one* has seen Rembrandt in *Danaë*.

How could this be? We see what we know. And what we know is the myth of Danaë with its usual suspects. It is a story of fate, rape, and murder. A father is forced to lock his own daughter in a lonely tower—an act of self-defense. He has been warned that he will die at the hand of his own grandchild; alas, a beautiful young girl, Danaë, wastes away in a prison. Zeus notices the lonely beauty and is filled with passion. He breaks into the tower by transforming himself

into a shower of gold, a convenient disguise hiding him from his jealous wife. From this violent intrusion, Danaë will become pregnant and a hero will be born to her. The prophecy will come true: this new hero eventually will slay his own grandfather. Let’s review the cast for a classical Danaë representation:

1. The beautiful, reclining, naked girl, Danaë;
2. The Greek god, Zeus, disguised in forms of gold (coins, rays, or streaming light); and
3. An old woman, a “keeper” or a maid, who is attending to Danaë in the locked tower.

We do not only *know*, we *see* this scene through the eyes of great Italian masters like Titian (fig. 3) and, local to Rembrandt, Goltzius (fig. 4). Thus, volumes have been written on Rembrandt’s *Danaë* with naturally only a few words in passing mentioning the old female servant in the background.

After the initial feeling of ecstasy from discovering Rembrandt inserting himself into this story, I began asking myself, “Why?” Why would Rembrandt hide himself in this painting? Let’s pursue the hints in the work itself.

#### KEYS

REMBRANDT, WHO left only seven letters for posterity<sup>2</sup>—all of which, sadly, involve negotiation and haggling over payments for his work—has gifted us with an enormous visual diary of his personality. Numerous self-portraits survive, including drawings, etchings, and paintings. (A different number is accounted for depending on the latest research.)<sup>3</sup> Through these countless self-representations, Rembrandt exposes his un-glorified physique of short and well-fed stature, and shows himself as well as a man of wit, humor, and independent mind. Rembrandt does not scruple to portray himself at the feet of Christ (fig. 5) or as a street beggar

(fig. 6). He continues to examine himself, whether full-size or in close-up, as the historic figure he himself was or in a historical scene wearing a costume—even reducing his presence to a body part. Hidden in the sea of characters of the famous *Night Watch*, one can detect a hint of Rembrandt.<sup>4</sup> Here, the artist represents himself with the most important instrument of his trade—his eye (fig. 7). One can glimpse the famous beret, which became a form of Rembrandt’s signature (fig. 8). Rembrandt also allows the viewer into his studio: while Rembrandt is caught contemplating his work, all the viewers are able to see is the canvas’s “behind” (fig. 9). Only the master has true access or the keys to his art.

*Danaë* presents Rembrandt to us in a new role. Here, his image is a hybrid. Rembrandt is both an artist—wearing the beret, holding the palette and brushes—as well as an occupant of a space that is traditionally reserved for an old maid or a “keeper” (who “keeps” an eye on a locked-up Danaë). In Rembrandt’s hands, we find keys: he is the “keeper” of truth. Once the artist is revealed, the viewer holds the key to this work. As in *Alice in Wonderland*, the key was there all along, only we did not know it.

#### GESTURES

WHAT IS Rembrandt doing in this painting, then? To investigate, let’s follow the gestures (fig. 2). With the sweep of an arm, Rembrandt raises the curtain as if to:

1. Welcome the divine presence;
2. Offer the naked beauty not only to God but also to the viewer;
3. Reveal himself.

As previously noted, his right hand holds the keys. But this is just a decoy. Tucked over his arm is a round palette, and a few brushes are clenched in the hand. What would a typical Dutch, seventeenth-century palette look like? You do not

have to go far to find out. Let’s examine Rembrandt’s own record of *The Artist in his Studio*: on the wall hang two palettes, both oval-shaped, the larger one having a half-moon cut out on the upper lip. Then, look closer at the clutching gesture in the portrait—the hand is painted as a suggestion with vertical brushes pointing towards the chest.

There are two more characters to consider: Danaë and Cupid. Danaë’s right hand is raised in the traditional gesture of reception. It dates back to the ancient Roman gesture of greeting and reciprocation, as if to say, “I hear you.” Her greeting is directed at the light streaming toward her. The light literally touches her palm, illuminating it with gold highlights. At the same time, the diagonal line from Danaë’s index finger leads the viewer directly to Rembrandt’s face. Disguised as a servant, Rembrandt is the creator of both Danaë and the painting; he is the true master of light. Could he be so daring as to align himself with the divinity? Is Danaë then a sacrifice to the gods or a present for himself? Cupid, whose image traditionally represents a type of insurance of reciprocated love, plays a supporting role in this comedy of deception. To great surprise, in Rembrandt’s *Danaë* Cupid’s face is grimacing with sadness and his hands are shackled (fig. 10). Simon Schama, in his book *Rembrandt’s Eyes*, notes that long ago Erwin Panofsky pointed to this chained Cupid as representing Danaë’s chastity.<sup>5</sup> However, if Rembrandt is deeming himself the true creator of this painting, the chained Cupid can also signify that he, the artist, is victorious over the love god and that he thus needs no assistance in this matter. Rembrandt the matchmaker?

#### VISUAL EVIDENCE

WE ARE used to seeing Rembrandt through his numerous self-portraits from a three-quarters view, showing off the right side of his face to the viewer. To my delight, there are a painting and an etching in which Rembrandt is turning his left cheek toward the viewer. Compare the close-up of Rembrandt from *Danaë* to the painting *Self-Portrait*, 1659 (fig.

11), and the etching, *Self-Portrait, Bareheaded*, 1629 (fig 12); there are some striking similarities.

1. The nose: a long flat bridge with a slight swelling in the middle ends with a bulbous, rounded tip. The nostril flares out prominently with a clear distinction of the planes moving away from light.

2. The brow: a clearly-etched vertical wrinkle is burrowed between Rembrandt's eyes. This sign of intellect and concentration is prevalent in Rembrandt's representations of himself.

3. The mouth: thinly stretched lips are intently pursed up at the left corner.

4. The eyes: the outer edge slants downward; a hint of the upper lid is visible, although obscured by the sagging upper fold. Rembrandt stares deeply at the canvas.

5. The cheek bone: the feature is clearly defined with a round swelling followed by a quick slant that forms a deep pocket, emphasized by a dark line or shadow.

6. The beret: Rembrandt's beret has grown into so intimate a part of his identity that it can almost be described as a facial feature.

The beret worn in *Danaë* is reminiscent of the one painted in *Self-Portrait at the Age of 63* (fig. 13). Note the brown top with a white lining that shows as a narrow band across the forehead.

The insertion of self in *Danaë*, on the other hand, may not be called a "self-portrait" in a traditional sense: it is more of a signature face that Rembrandt reveals to say, "Here I am. I saw this." Or what I call an "I" witness.

#### SHOES

THERE ARE more biographical links to the painting of *Danaë* than can be seen on the surface. Scholars agree that Rembrandt began *Danaë* in the 1630s but that he returned to it sometime in the 1640s or 1650s. Revisions are visible

on the X-rays (fig. 14). Saskia, Rembrandt’s legendary wife, was most probably the original inspiration and model for Danaë. Her face and body have been reworked, and after her death, she was most likely replaced by one of Rembrandt’s mistresses, either Geertje Dirckx or Hendrickje Stoffels (figs. 15 and 16). The two shoes at the bottom of the bed would not fit one woman (fig. 17). One is dramatically smaller than the other, and it is evidently of different design: the smaller shoe is enclosed and the bigger is a “slip-in.” Could this signify one shoe for each of his women?<sup>6</sup> Danaë may then be a kind of a hybrid beauty, similar to the synthesis Pliny described in recounting how the painter Zeuxis chose from a selection of beautiful maidens in order to create the goddess Hera.<sup>7</sup> Once again, Rembrandt is seen in the light of a godly creator, giving birth to his perfect woman.

But Danaë is not the only *pentimento* in the painting. X-rays reveal that Rembrandt returned to the background character as well. Schama observed that Rembrandt “strengthened the fall of golden light on her body, he also turned the maidservant’s face from profile, providing a bigger surface area—both cheeks, the nose, forehead, and tip of the chin—to catch that brilliance.”<sup>8</sup> By strengthening the light, was Rembrandt trying to attract more attention to the image in the background? Did he insert himself into *Danaë* from the beginning, or did he change the traditional maid’s representation into the image of the artist at a later date?

#### THE ALIBI

JUNE 25, 1644. Jan D’Ablein’s inheritance was examined for proper taxation.<sup>9</sup> The document survives, recording a large painting of Venus by Rembrandt. Stop—there is no such painting! Yuri Kuznetsov, in his book *Danaë Mysteries*,<sup>10</sup> suggests that the unknown Venus was indeed our Danaë hiding under a false identity. That means that Rembrandt sold his painting. But Danaë is also mentioned in Rembrandt’s 1656 bankruptcy inventory, which implies that the artist

never parted with his beloved painting.<sup>11</sup> These are two contradictory pieces of evidence—unless, as proposed by Kuznetsov, Rembrandt bought his painting back sometime between 1644 and 1656. It seems that after Saskia's death in 1642, Rembrandt critically changed his outlook and executed new versions of a number of his masterpieces, including the famous *Susana and the Elders*.<sup>12</sup> However, with *Danaë*, Rembrandt went a step further—he repainted the original!

A *Danaë* sketch survives (either created by Rembrandt or by his pupil) from the 1630s (fig. 18).<sup>13</sup> It shows a clear relationship to the *Danaë* painting: a reclining naked woman stretches her hand to the light, which is suggested by three diagonal strokes from an upper corner. Behind a massive bed, a servant turns in profile. Look closely: the headgear is not a beret, but a typical loose female garment. One can detect the suggestion of a breast by the swelling of the line. This sketch reveals the initial state of the *Danaë* painting in which Rembrandt had inserted a typical female servant. Close up, you can see that a quick swoop of the pen suggests the servant has gathered a cloth in the shape of a sack to collect the gold. Let's recall the X-rays of *Danaë*: Rembrandt changed the servant from a profile to three-quarter view, he repainted the hand of the servant to open the curtain (originally held by Danaë), and he emphasized the streaming light to illuminate the servant. It fits: Rembrandt bought his painting to make a remarkable change—to change a “she” into a “he,” a “servant” into “himself!” Compare the flipped or mirror image of a servant from Rembrandt's “*Bathsheba at Her Bath*” to the servant in *Danaë*.<sup>14</sup> You can see how the head garment transforms into a beret. The soft female features transform into much more rough, exaggerated ones.

Why had no one noticed this significant change? Titian is partly to blame. Titian served as a classical point of reference for representations of Danaë already in Rembrandt's time.<sup>15</sup> To make the matter worse, the same collector purchased both Titian's and Rembrandt's pieces. As early as 1755, the catalogue of Baron de Thiers mentions, in the small salon, to

the right of the door, Titian’s *Danaë Receiving Jupiter Turned Himself into Golden Rain* and across from it, on the same subject—a Rembrandt.<sup>16</sup> On January 4, 1772, both paintings were purchased by Catherine II for the Hermitage. Thus, these two masterpieces crossed fates forever. In this context, it is easy to see how Rembrandt’s *Danaë* was, and still is, considered a response to Titian’s work. Naturally, the seductive naked girl in the foreground, comprising the subject of hundreds of pages of art history, stole the show. Thus, one of the most radical inventions by Rembrandt remained invisible until now.

## NOTES

1. In my discussions, David Bomford, Acting Director of The J. Paul Getty Museum, expressed enthusiasm for my hypothesis regarding the resemblance between Rembrandt and the figure previously identified as a maid in the background of *Danaë*. In addition, Amy Golahny, Richmond Professor of Art History, Lycoming College in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, supports this observation.

2. Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, *Seven Letters*, H. Gerson, ed.; Isabella H. Van Eeghen, transcription; Yda D. Ovink, translation (The Hague 1961).

3. See E. van de Wetering, ed., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings IV: The Self-Portraits* (Dordrecht 2005), for the latest research.

4. S. Schama, *Rembrandt’s Eyes* (New York 1999), 500.

5. Schama (note 4), 387.

6. Dr. George Gershman first suggested the shoe discrepancy.

7. Schama (note 4), 390.

8. Schama (note 4), 387.

9. A. Bredius, *Oud-Holland*, XXVIII, (’s-Gravenhage 1910), 9.

10. U. Kuznetsov, *The Mysteries of Danaë*, (Leningrad 1970), 7.

11. *The Rembrandt Documents*, W. L. Strauss and M. Van Der Meulen (New York 1979), 385. “On the Picture Rack,” item 347: “A large picture of Danaë.”

12. Kuznetsov (note 10), 56–57.

13. William W. Robinson, Curator of Drawings at Harvard Art Museums and Fogg Museum, believes that the *Danaë* pen drawing in Braunschweig has an interesting connection with the first state of the Hermitage painting. Whether by Rembrandt or his pupil, which is difficult to determine, he believes that it is in the style of the 1630s, which agrees with the reflection of the first state of Rembrandt’s *Danaë* painting. In addition, Dr. Thomas





FIG. 1. Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606–69). *Danaë*. 1636. Hermitage, St. Petersburg, Russia. Photo Credit: Scala / Art Resource, NY.



FIG. 2. Rembrandt, *Danaë*, detail.



FIG. 3. Titian (Tiziano Vecellio) (c.1488–1576). *Danaë*. Hermitage, St. Petersburg, Russia. Photo Credit: Scala / Art Resource, NY.



FIG. 4. Goltzius, Hendrick (1558–1617). *The Sleeping Danaë Being Prepared to Receive Jupiter*. 1603. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California, USA. Photo Credit: Digital Image © Museum Associates / LACMA / Art Resource.



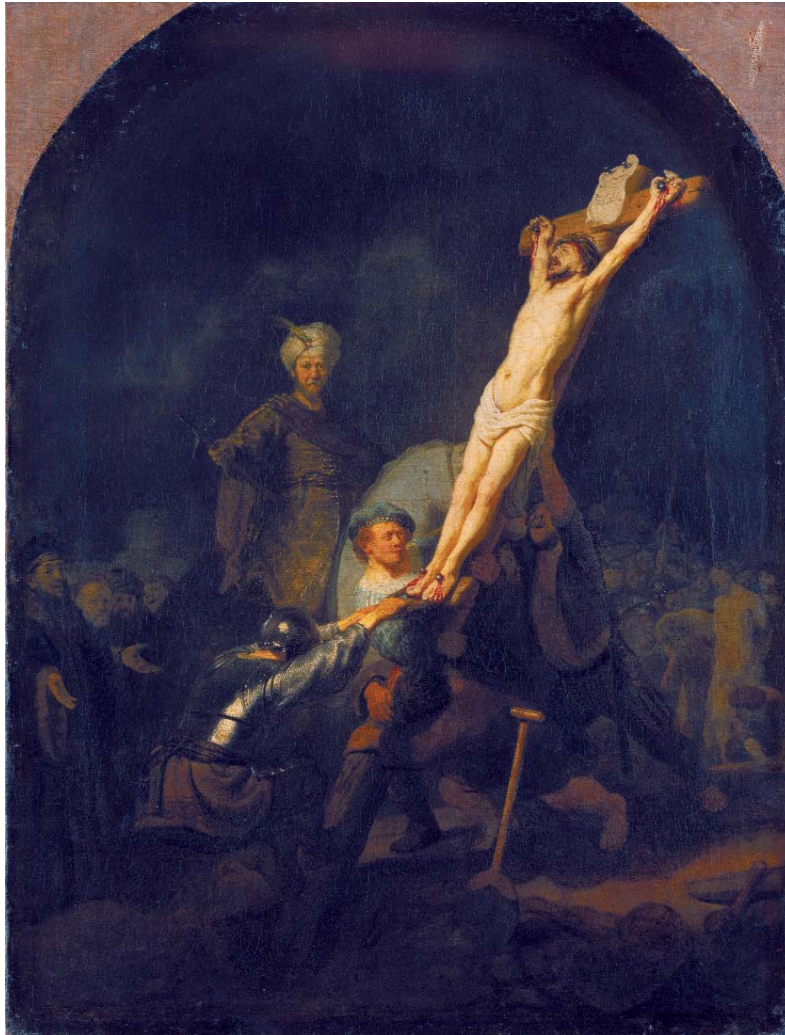


FIG. 5. Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn. *The Raising of the Cross*. Alte Pinakothek, Bayerische Staatsgemaltesammlungen, Munich, Germany. Photo Credit: Art Resource, NY.



FIG. 6. Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn. *Beggar Seated on a Bank*. 1630. The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, NY. Photo Credit: The Pierpont Morgan Library / Art Resource, NY.



FIG. 7. Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn. *The Night Watch*. Photo Credit: Rijks-museum.





FIG. 8. *The Night Watch*, detail.





FIG. 9. Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn. *The Painter in his Studio*. ca. 1628. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

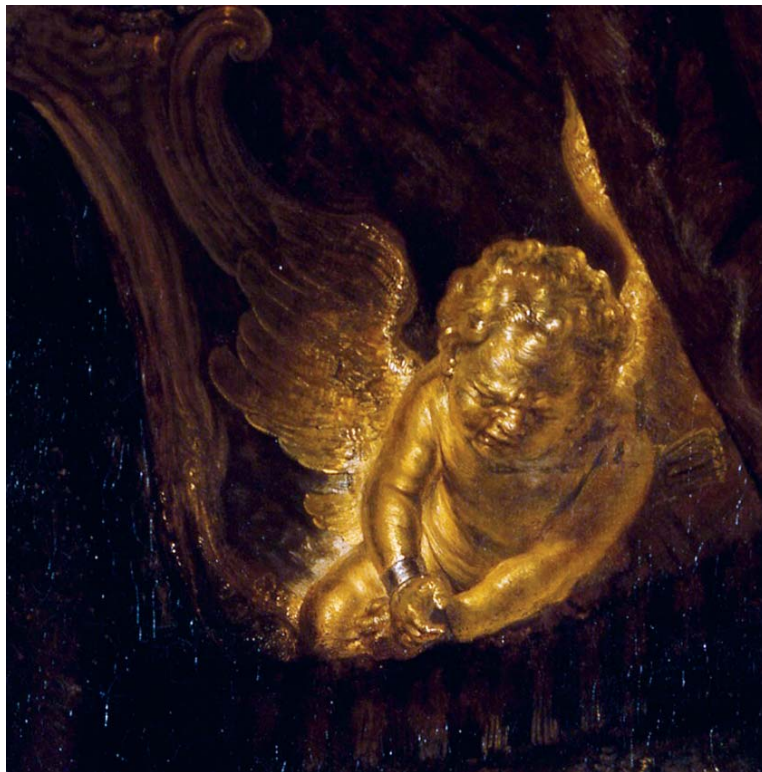


FIG. 10. Rembrandt, *Danaë*, detail.



FIG. 11. Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn. *Self-Portrait with Beret and Turned-up Collar*. 1659. National Gallery of Art, Washington.



FIG. 12. Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn. *Self-Portrait, Bare-headed*. 1629. British Museum, London.





FIG. 13. Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn. *Self-Portrait at the Age of 63*. 1669. National Gallery, London, Great Britain. Photo Credit: © National Gallery, London / Art Resource, NY.

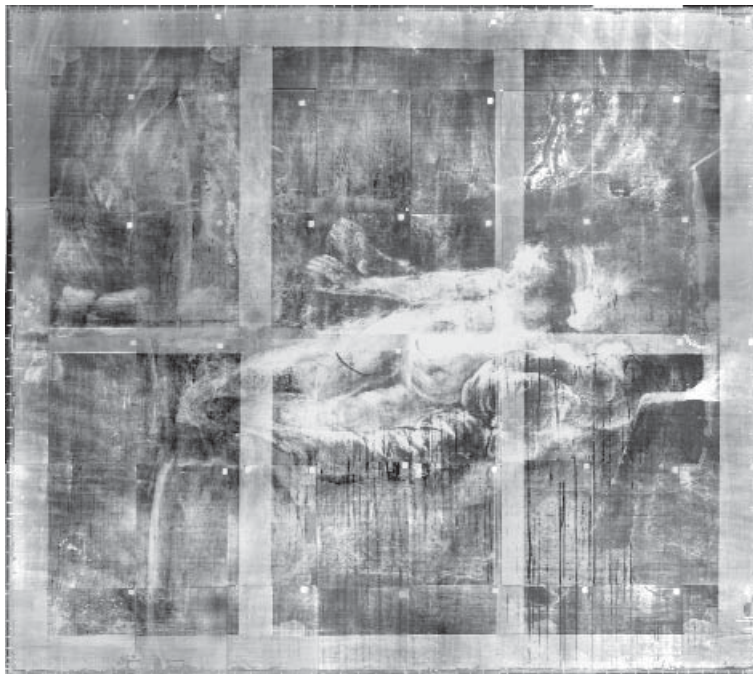


FIG. 14. Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn. *Danaë*. X-Ray courtesy of The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia. Inv. no. GE-723. Photograph © The State Hermitage Museum. Photo by Alexander Kossolapov.



FIG. 15. Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn. *Bathseba at her Bath*. 1654. Louvre, Paris, France. Photo Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.



FIG. 16. Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn. *A Woman Bathing in a Stream*. 1654. National Gallery, London, Great Britain. Photo Credit: © National Gallery, London / Art Resource, NY.





FIG. 17. Rembrandt, *Danaë*, detail.

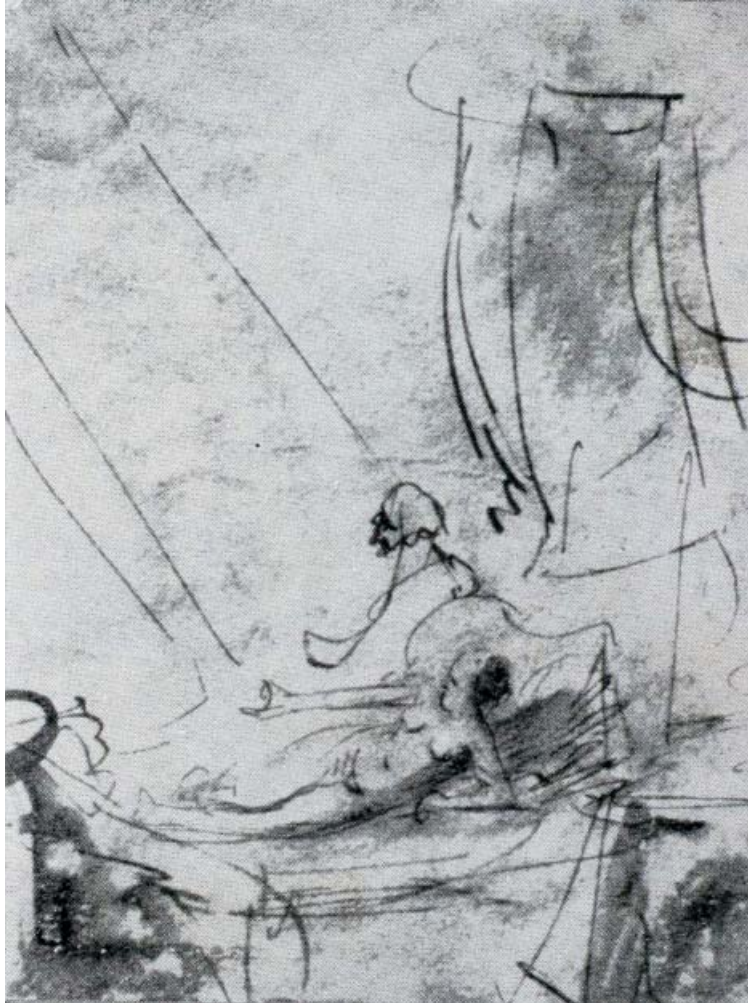


FIG. 18. Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn. *Danaë*. 1630. Print Room, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig, Germany.

Döring in “Aus Rembrandts Kreis. Die Zeichnungen des Braunschweiger Kupferstichkabinetts,” 2006, cat. no. 1, tentatively attributed this drawing to Ferdinand Bol.

14. Artist and film director Peter Greenaway first suggested the juxtaposition of two “servants” in conversation.

15. Compare the maid in Titian’s *Danaë* (fig. 3) with the one in the Braunschweig *Danaë* drawing (fig. 19): an assessment reveals similarity in the profiles of the two women (head garments, pointed chins, and tilts of the heads).

16. Antoine Crozat, Baron de Thiers, *Catalogue des tableaux di cabinet de M. de Crozat* (Paris 1755), 35.