Rembrandt the Etcher

Jacques Roland

February 2026

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The Death of the Virgin (c. 1639), {Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam}
This etching is characteristic of Rembrandt's working method. The Virgin

forms the focal point of the composition: she is fully illuminated, with no details or shadows indicated on her garment, which is made of white fabric. The scene brings together seventeen figures, whose expressions are rendered with great emotional intensity. As one moves away from the figure of the Virgin, the clothing of the surrounding figures is progressively depicted with greater detail and shadow, thereby reinforcing the visual and spiritual hierarchy of the composition. Rembrandt uses drypoint to strengthen certain dark areas. In a turbulent sky, angels appear in an opening of light. Some are only roughly sketched; the angels' hands in particular are drawn in a deliberately approximate manner, in contrast to the especially careful rendering of the hands of the figures surrounding the Virgin. This differentiated treatment demonstrates Rembrandt's attention to the areas of the composition on which he wishes to focus the viewer's gaze.

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Introduction

In the previous lecture, entitled « Rembrandt the Draughtsman », we examined Rembrandt's approach to study and work, as evidenced by his drawings and etchings.

Characteristic features of Rembrandt's personality and work include:

- His exceptional memory and analytical skills meant that he could capture the main features of a scene after observing it for thirty seconds or less.

- He never drew, etched or painted the same subject twice in the same way. This was possible because he had an exceptional imagination and memory. For example, this allowed him to tackle a biblical subject or a self-portrait over several decades without ever repeating himself.

- He was a man who loved freedom, a quality reflected in his drawings and etchings. The lines in his drawings are completely free and sometimes unpredictable. He studied calligraphy from a very young age, which enabled him to achieve this freedom of line. In eengraving, it is the etching technique that enables him to maintain this spontaneity. To preserve this freedom, he etched without inverting his drawing.

- When creating a work, Rembrandt knew how to draw the viewer's eye to the part he considered essential. This can be seen in the examples cited in « Rembrandt the Draughtsman » and in the etching The Death of the Virgin (p. 3). He did not necessarily seek to produce a « polished » work.

- He was a researcher. He was never satisfied with what he knew, constantly developing his technique and approach throughout his life.

- Finally, he did not care what people thought, leaving approximations and even errors in his work in progress.

Rembrandt's ultimate goal when creating a work was to convey a message and make the subject of his study deeply human.

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The historical context (Leiden) *

While France and England are tearing each other apart and becoming impoverished during the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453), the dukes of Burgundy acquire and establish the Burgundian Netherlands from the late fourteenth century and throughout the fifteenth century by bringing together the lordships that formed the « Seventeen Provinces ». After the period of Burgundian rule, the « Seventeen Provinces » become the Spanish Netherlands at the beginning of the sixteenth century. They correspond to the present-day Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, as well as the Nord–Pas-de-Calais region in France.

During the period of the Dukes of Burgundy and throughout the first half of the sixteenth century, maritime trade experienced considerable growth around the port of Antwerp. The city and its surrounding region then became a major center for industrial development, printing, and the arts. Printing played an essential role there, notably thanks to the Plantin Press of Antwerp, founded by Christophe Plantin (1520–1589), which established itself as one of the principal centers for the dissemination of books in Europe. At the same time, the arts — painting, engraving, and sculpture — underwent remarkable development. Flemish painting flourished particularly in the cities of Bruges, Ghent, Antwerp, and Brussels. Among its leading figures were Jan van Eyck (c. 1390–1441), Hans Memling (c. 1435/1440–1494), Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450–1516), and Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c. 1525–1569).

Flemish painting is distinguished by the development of oil painting and by the realism of its representations. Pieter Bruegel, a painter and engraver considered one of the founders of the Flemish school, summed up his approach with this injunction: « *Paint what you see* ». Carel van Mander (1548–1606), a Flemish painter and writer, recounts the following about Bruegel: « *He enjoyed, in the company of his friend Franckert, mingling with peasants at weddings or fairs. Both disguised themselves as peasants, brought gifts like the other guests, and behaved as if they were members of the family or part of the couple's circle. In this way, Bruegel took pleasure in observing peasant customs: their table manners, their dances, their games, their ways of courting, as well as the many comical scenes of everyday life. He was then able to reproduce them with great sensitivity, much humor, and a remarkable mastery of color* ». Van Mander also emphasizes that « *Bruegel had a profound understanding of the character of peasants, both men and women. He knew how to portray them naturally,*

capturing their clothing and their sometimes awkward gestures as they danced, walked, stood, or carried out various tasks », thus giving his works exceptional powers of observation and humanity. In the seventeenth century, the Antwerp school was chiefly represented by Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641), and Jacob Jordaens (1593–1678). These artists embody the flourishing of Flemish Baroque painting and contributed greatly to its influence throughout Europe. Rembrandt, for his part, belongs to the purest tradition of the Flemish school, extending its legacy through the depth of his realism, his mastery of light, and his keen sense of observation.

A part of the Seventeen Provinces of the Spanish Netherlands, predominantly Protestant, rose up against ultra-Catholic Spain during the Eighty Years' War (1568–1648). In this context, Leiden, the second city of Holland and an important center of the textile industry, was besieged by Spanish troops in 1573–1574. The city resisted and the siege was lifted on October 3, 1574, but the conflict left dramatic consequences: nearly a quarter of the population died of hunger or disease during the ordeal. In 1581, seven provinces, led by Holland, proclaimed their independence and took the name Republic of the Seven United Provinces of the Netherlands. A truce was signed in Antwerp in 1609; it lasted twelve years, until 1621. Although the Eighty Years' War was marked by numerous land battles between the United Provinces and Spain, it was above all characterized by intense naval activity. The United Provinces confronted Spain and Portugal in order to break their maritime hegemony and seize control of the major trade routes. Thus, six naval battles pitted the United Provinces against Spain in 1573–1574. In 1588, ships of the United Provinces fought alongside the English fleet against the Spanish Invincible Armada. Subsequently, two naval battles opposed the United Provinces to Portugal between 1601 and 1606, followed by three others against Spain between 1606 and 1615. Finally, between 1621 and 1647, ten additional naval battles set the United Provinces against Spain and Portugal. The war ended with the Treaty of Münster in 1648, by which Spain officially recognized the independence of the United Provinces. After this date, Spain and Portugal definitively lost their hegemony over the world's seas.

The Wars of Religion, which led to the sack of Antwerp in 1576 and its siege in 1585, brought an end to the city's supremacy. The religious intolerance of the Catholic authorities prompted the emigration of the most dynamic elements of the population—scholars, printers, and entrepreneurs—toward the north. The Republic of the Seven United Provinces thus inherited a large part of the industry and commerce of the southern Netherlands, corresponding to

present-day Belgium. In this context, the city of Leiden experienced extremely rapid expansion. With a population of around 15,000 inhabitants in 1573, it grew to nearly 45,000 by 1622. In recognition of the city's heroic resistance during the siege of 1574, William I of Orange founded the University of Leiden in 1575, which was destined to become one of the most prestigious intellectual centers in Europe and to attract many leading thinkers. Alongside its major role in the textile industry, Leiden also established itself as an important center of printing and publishing. This growth was notably encouraged by the temporary stay of Christophe Plantin, invited by the university, as well as by the settlement of the Elzevier family, originally from Louvain.

In 1613, two theologians from the University of Leiden, Jacobus Arminius and Franciscus Gomarus, had a major disagreement about predestination. Arminius' supporters, known as the Remonstrants, argued that human actions on Earth were part of a divine plan, leaving room for free will. They seized power within the municipal council of Leiden. In the predominantly Calvinist United Provinces, the two movements coexisted: the Remonstrants, who were more tolerant but in the minority, and the Counter-Remonstrants, who were proponents of strict Calvinism. Taking advantage of the truce, the Dutch set about rebuilding the country, preparing for the resumption of war and resolving their religious divisions. In 1618, the Synod of Dordrecht ruled in favour of the Counter-Remonstrants. Governor Maurice of Nassau then seized power in Leiden by force. Rembrandt's father, a member of the Remonstrant movement, was stripped of his public offices. While certain religious minorities were tolerated, their members were barred from the most important positions in society. Johan van Oldenbarnevelt (1547–1619), a former collaborator of William I of Orange-Nassau and one of the leaders of the Remonstrants, was arrested on Maurice of Nassau's orders. Accused of treason, he was executed in 1619. Another leading figure in the Remonstrant movement, the famous humanist and jurist Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), who was also a former student at the University of Leiden, was arrested too. However, he escaped by hiding in a trunk of books and leaving the country.

The plague remained endemic in the Netherlands throughout the 17th century, with particularly deadly outbreaks occurring at certain times. In Leiden, the worst periods were in 1624–1625, 1635–1636, 1655 and 1664. Despite neighbourhood lockdown measures being implemented, the city was severely affected by the 1635–1636 epidemic, which decimated a significant portion of the population.

Although Dutch society was relatively tolerant of religious minorities and thinkers, such as scholars, philosophers and writers, it was much less tolerant of lifestyles considered to be outside the norm. Transgressions of social conventions were not tolerated well, as evidenced by the treatment of beggars in Amsterdam and the cases of the painters **Johannes Torrentius** and Rembrandt. In 1613, the Amsterdam municipality banned begging and opened two forced rehabilitation centres: the Raphuis for men and the Spinhuis for women (Renouard de Bussierre, 1986; see Self-Portrait as a Beggar, p. 39). Johannes Symonsz van der Beeck, also known as Johannes Torrentius (1589–1644), was a famous Amsterdam painter known for his still lifes. He was also known for his libertine lifestyle, challenging established dogmas and advocating free will. In 1620, he made the mistake of settling in Haarlem, a city that was much less tolerant than Amsterdam. This led to his arrest in 1627. He was accused of blasphemy, heresy, atheism, Satanism, belonging to the Rosicrucian Order and creating erotic artwork. After being tortured and imprisoned, he was sentenced to twenty years in prison and all of his works were destroyed, with the exception of a single painting: *Still Life with Horse Bridle* (1614). In 1629, Charles I of England, a great admirer of Torrentius, secured his release and brought him to England. Traumatised by his years in prison, Torrentius was unable to resume painting. He returned to Amsterdam in 1642 and died in poverty in 1644. Rembrandt was brought to trial, and in 1658 Amsterdam's high society took advantage of his bankruptcy to get rid of him.

Etching techniques before Rembrandt *

The etching technique was developed by Arab goldsmiths in Spain and Syria, particularly in Damascus. The metal is covered with a soft, non-transparent varnish which was formerly known as « mol » varnish. Using soft varnish makes the work very delicate: if you place your hand or fingers on the varnish, it sticks to the skin. When acid is poured onto the plate, the fingerprint is engraved. The acid used is nitric acid, formerly known as « etching fluid », which gave its name to the engraving process. Nowadays, iron perchloride is used to etch copper as it is much less toxic than nitric acid. After the back of the plate has been protected, it is immersed in a tank containing the acid.

Masso Finiguerra (1426–1464) was an Italian goldsmith and engraver who wished to supervise the creation of his *Triumph and the Coronation of the Virgin, Taken Up to Heaven and Surrounded by Angels* (1452). Before filling the engraved lines with niello, he experimented with darkening the incised lines with candle soot on a damp sheet of paper to see what the engraved figures

would produce. The paper faithfully reproduced the image drawn on the metal. This technique, whereby the engraved grooves in metal are filled with ink, is called intaglio. Niello is a black silver sulfide inlay used in engravings on precious metals. Along with Masso Finiguerra, Andrea Mantegna (1431–1506), an Italian painter and engraver, is regarded as the inventor of copperplate engraving (chalcography) in Italy. He engraved using a burin (see, for example, *The Descent into Limbo*, c. 1475). Copper engraving subsequently spread throughout Italy, Burgundy, Flanders and the Rhine Valley.

Daniel Hopfer (1470–1536) was a German armourer and engraver who first conceived the idea of using the etching technique to print images (see, for example, *Three Old Women Beating the Devil*). The technique of engraving on metal plates emerged in Switzerland around 1513 with Urs Graf (1485–1527), in Germany with Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) and in Italy from 1530 onwards with Parmigianino (Francesco Mazzola, 1503–1540). It quickly became one of the favoured media of painter-engravers. At the beginning of the 17th century, the Dutch engraver Simon Frisius (c. 1570–1628), notably the author of the etching *Landscape*, and the Swiss engraver Matthäus Merian the Elder (1593–1650), who began practising etching around 1610–1615, are considered the first great masters of this technique. They produced prints comparable to those achieved through burin engraving (A. Bosse, 1645).

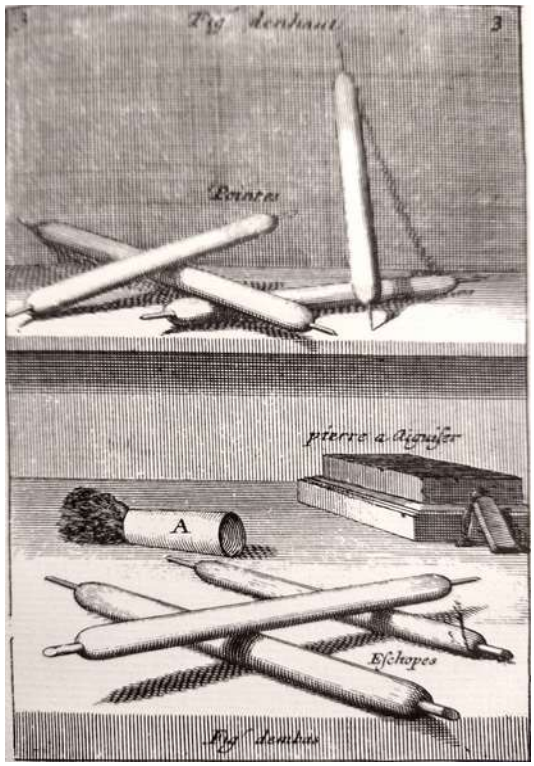
There are two other methods of engraving line work on a copper plate, which are often used in combination with the etching technique practised by Rembrandt. The first method involves engraving the plate with a burin. A burin is a rod of hardened steel with a cross-section that can be square, rectangular or diamond-shaped. The tip is cut at an angle and carefully sharpened to allow the engraver to cut fine or deep grooves into the metal plate. These incisions are clean and sharp without raised edges and the metal is removed in the form of shavings. Burin engraving is the oldest technique, emerging around 1430, but it remains difficult to master. One of its greatest masters was Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528). The second method is drypoint engraving. This technique uses a steel needle to incise the metal plate directly. This makes it possible to achieve rich gradations in dark areas. Unlike the burin technique, drypoint does not remove the metal, but instead displaces it, forming burrs on either side of the groove. These raised edges hold the ink and produce thicker, darker lines when printed. However, the plate is more fragile since strong pressure from the press gradually flattens these burrs. Finally, it should be noted that attacking the metal directly with a tool does not produce lines as free and spontaneous as those achieved through etching.

Jacques Callot *

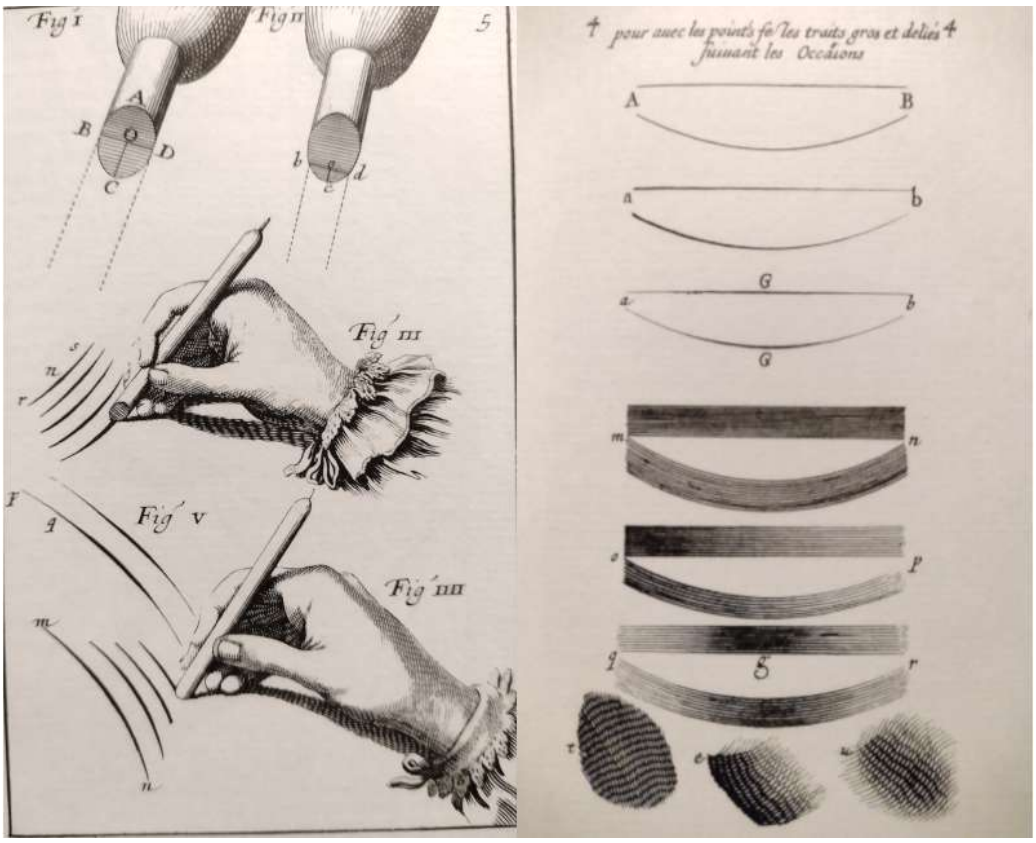
Jacques Callot (1592–1635), a French etcher, made significant improvements to the etching technique by introducing :

1) between 1616 and 1617, **a transparent hard varnish** employed by lute makers in Florence and Venice. This varnish made etching much easier as it enabled artists to see previous incisions on the plate and to touch or place objects on it without risking damage to the ground. After applying the varnish, the plate had to be dried by heating. This process was quickly adopted by many 17th century painter-engravers, and its use continued into the early 18th century, as documented by Abraham Bosse (1645).

2) The use of the ***échoppe***, a tool similar to the burin and borrowed from goldsmiths, makes it possible to produce thick and thin lines. Unlike the burin, which has a square, rectangular, or lozenge-shaped cross-section and is cut with a bevel, the ***échoppe*** has a round cross-section and is also cut with a bevel (A. Bosse, 1645).

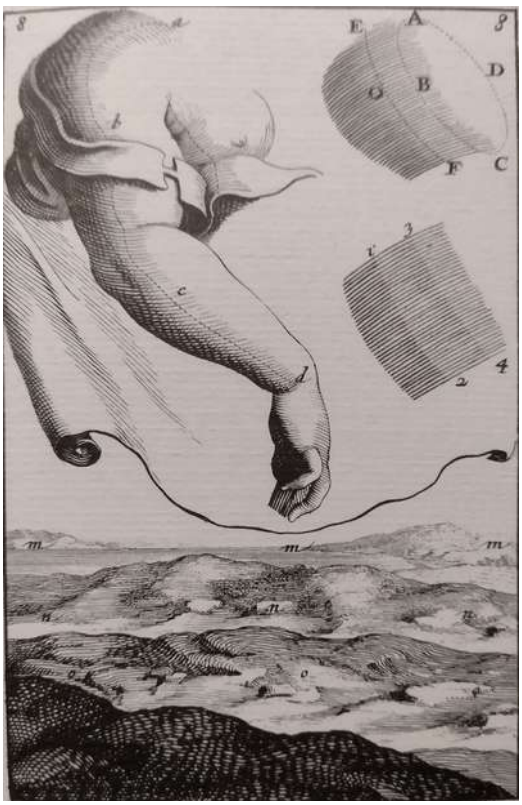


Example of points (top) and *échoppes* (bottom) - (A. Bosse 1645)



Engravings of thick and thin lines obtained with an *échoppe* (A. Bosse 1645)

3) **The multiple acid bite technique** generally involves performing three successive etchings on a metal plate to create varying line intensities and/or produce gradients and the impression of volume. The longer the plate remains in the acid, the deeper the bite. First, a relatively short etching is performed. The plate is then rinsed with water and the varnish is removed from the areas to be protected using a soft piece of willow charcoal soaked in water. Care must be taken not to scratch the metal. These areas are then coated with a mixture of tallow and oil, applied with a brush, to shield them from the next etching. Tallow is an animal fat obtained by rendering the fat of herbivores. Historically, it has been used in the production of candles, ointments, soaps and lubricants. Acid is then applied to the plate again to achieve a second, deeper bite. Finally, the procedure is repeated a third time to produce more nuanced effects of depth and gradient (A. Bosse, 1645).



Etching produced using the multiple bite technique (A. Bosse, 1645)

Using a transparent hard varnish makes it much simpler to achieve lines of varying intensity and suggest volume than with the multiple-bite technique. This method involves applying acid for different lengths of time using needles of different thicknesses. First, the faintest lines are lightly drawn, typically representing the most distant areas of the landscape or construction lines. A short initial acid bite is then performed. After removing the varnish from the entire plate, an optional proof print can be made to visualise this first stage. The plate is then degreased and recoated with varnish. As the varnish is transparent, the lines from the initial etching remain visible, enabling the artist to draw the lines corresponding to intermediate areas more heavily. A second, longer etching is then carried out. Once the varnish has been removed again, a proof can be made to evaluate the first two stages. Finally, the plate is degreased and varnished in preparation for the third stage. The darkest lines, which often correspond to foreground elements or shadowed areas of the landscape, are drawn and subjected to the longest acid bite. This gradual process enables precise depth and volume effects to be created.

In 1625, Jacques Callot, a celebrated etcher, received a major commission from the Infanta Isabella Clara Eugenia, daughter of Philip II and governess of the Spanish Netherlands. She wanted Callot to commemorate the Spanish victory at the Siege of Breda and the city's subsequent capitulation.

Jacques Callot: A Plate from the Siege of Breda

During his time in the Netherlands, Jacques Callot met several fellow painters and printmakers with whom he exchanged ideas. Although his technical innovations were not formally published until 1645 in *Traité des manières de graver en taille-douce* by Callot's pupil Abraham Bosse (c. 1603–1676), they were likely circulating informally and may have influenced Rembrandt.

Callot is particularly renowned for his etchings depicting the consequences of war in *Les Misères de la guerre*, as well as scenes of everyday life, including beggars. These works were known to, admired by, and collected by Rembrandt.

Jacques Callot: Peasants' Revenge (The Miseries of War)

Jacques Callot : Beggard

When Rembrandt started etching in 1625, neither products nor methods were standardised: each printmaker developed their own techniques and used their own materials. Seventeenth-century printmaking was a highly complex process that required considerable labour. There were no ready-made copper plates available for engraving; the printmaker first had to select high-quality copper and then commission a coppersmith to make and polish the plate. If the

printmaker had to polish the plate himself, he had do so in several stages: first with sandstone, then with pumice stone, followed by a soft whetstone, then willow charcoal, and finally removing the last scratches with a burnisher. Before applying the varnish, the plate had to be cleaned and degreased. The surface was rubbed with stale breadcrumbs or chalk powder (today, Meudon white is used) and then wiped with a clean cloth. Improper degreasing can prevent the varnish from adhering properly, allowing the acid to seep underneath it. To engrave a plate coated with soft varnish, it is placed on a small tabletop easel to ensure the varnish remains undisturbed while the artist works with a needle as though drawing or painting on an easel. Once the drawing is complete, the plate is bitten with acid. Before this, the back and edges of the plate are protected with a mixture of tallow and oil. Rembrandt could use one of two methods for acid-biting. Either acid was poured eight to ten times over the plate, which was set on an inclined surface (see figure), or a small wax wall was built around the edges of the plate, which was then placed horizontally. The acid, held in place by this border, would then bite into the copper in a controlled manner to create the etching.

Method of pouring acid onto the plate (A. Bosse, 1645)

At the end of the etching process, the plate was heated to soften the varnish, which was then wiped off with an olive oil-soaked cloth. Nowadays, after the back of the plate has been protected, it is immersed in an acid bath.

At the beginning of his career, Rembrandt most likely used a non-transparent soft ground. It is possible—though not certain—that he began employing a hard, transparent ground, like those used by lute makers (Jacques Callot) or by carpenters and shipwrights, after the start of his collaboration with Jan van Vliet around 1629. The use of a hard, transparent ground greatly facilitated the practice of etching. Rembrandt drew directly onto the plate without reversing his design, allowing him to work on the ground without the need to trace, blacken, or whiten the motif. Thanks to the transparency of the ground, he could carry out several successive bitings of varying duration, combined with the use of needles of different thicknesses to create distinct line intensities and thus produce an impression of volume, as in the *View of Amsterdam*. He could repeat these stages or acid bitings in varying sequences, offering great freedom in the final rendering. This method was much easier to use than the multiple-bite technique developed by Jacques Callot. Rembrandt used diluted nitric acid to control the depth of the bite and achieve great fineness of detail: the weaker the acid, the finer and more precise the lines.

View of Amsterdam

Rembrandt's early years

From 1620 to 1631, he underwent a period of learning and refinement. It was one of his most prolific periods. During this time, he developed his etching technique and devoted himself to studying the representation of faces and the expression of emotions.

Between 1614 and 1620, Rembrandt was a pupil at the Latin School in Leiden. He was introduced to calligraphy and drawing by Henricus Rievelink (M. Taylor, 2007). In 1620, he enrolled at Leiden University, but only attended irregularly as he was only interested in drawing and painting. The following year, he began a three-year apprenticeship with the Leiden painter Jacob van Swanenburgh (1571–1638), whose studio was located at Langebrug 89 in Leiden. He also worked alongside Joris van Schooten (1587–1651). At the same time, he set up a studio in his father's mill. In 1624, he completed his training with six months of work in Amsterdam under Pieter Lastman (1583–1633), who introduced him to Italian painting. Lastman was a great connoisseur of this field. Rembrandt also collaborated with Jan Pynas (1582–1631), a friend of Lastman's. Upon returning to Leiden, Rembrandt established his first studio, likely in collaboration with Jan Lievens (1607–1674), a friend from childhood. In 1628, Gerrit Dou (1613–1675), aged just fifteen, became his first pupil. This particularly talented young painter produced a portrait of Rembrandt in his Leiden studio. Around 1629, Rembrandt acquired a printing press and began collaborating with the Leiden engraver Jan van Vliet (c. 1605–1668). This collaboration continued for several years after Rembrandt moved to Amsterdam. During his time in Leiden, Rembrandt probably taught an additional four pupils. The studio he shared with Jan Lievens soon became a veritable research laboratory, buzzing with activity and with each person's work stimulating that of the others. Rembrandt was recognised as a young painter of great talent very early on. As early as 1628, Aernout van Buchell (1565–1641), a humanist from Utrecht, wrote that Rembrandt was a highly sought-after young artist with a reputation as an 'enfant terrible', and he expressed concern about the consequences of such early success. After completing a painting, he was advised to show it to an art lover in The Hague. He went there, took the work with him, and sold it for a hundred guilders. Following this initial success, the lure of financial gain encouraged him to work even harder. In 1629, Constantijn Huygens (1596–1687), a statesman, poet and musician from The Hague, also became enthusiastic about the young Rembrandt, whose name was already familiar to wealthy art lovers and collectors.

Once a young painter had completed his training, it was customary for him to travel to Italy to study the works of the Italian masters before setting up his own business. However, rather than Apollo or Venus, Rembrandt's favourite models were a peasant, a tavern maid, and the other humble characters one might encounter in the streets. Rembrandt's true masters were nature and his exceptional talent. He drew and depicted what he saw around him without embellishing it. In doing so, he followed in the purest tradition of the Flemish school, as defined by its founder, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, who stated: "Paint what you see". Rembrandt's world essentially comprised his studio — a veritable research laboratory shared with his students and collaborators — and biblical stories, a major source of inspiration. It also included his family and neighbourhood, where he would walk and observe the lives of his fellow citizens, finding subjects for his drawings along the way. Over time, this territory expanded to include the countryside around Amsterdam. Rembrandt was a homebody who did not travel extensively. Despite living near the port of Amsterdam, he never sketched the large sailing ships that travelled the world and brought wealth to the city. Instead, he depicted the boats and Skutjes (flat-bottomed sailing boats with keels that are characteristic of Friesland) that he encountered on the canals during his walks. A hard worker, Rembrandt led a modest lifestyle and made no effort to dress well. He was almost always dressed in his stained painter's smock and did not mind rubbing shoulders with poor people or tramps. His friend and patron, Jan Six (1618–1700), tried unsuccessfully to encourage him to take more care with his appearance. Rembrandt loved money and earned a lot of it. Unfortunately, he had one great weakness: he was addicted to spending his income on buying and collecting works of art.

Rembrandt was probably introduced to engraving during his six-month stay with Pieter Lastman in Amsterdam. Back in Leiden, between 1625 and 1626, he started practising etching, printing his first plates in 1626 and 1627. Between 1628 and 1631, he developed and refined his etching technique in collaboration with Jan van Vliet. During this period, Rembrandt produced around seventy etchings, including twenty-four etched self-portraits — nearly a quarter of his total output. The years 1630–1631 marked a decisive turning point in his career as a printmaker. During this time, he perfected his etching technique with works such as Self-Portrait with a Hat and Ruff, and mastered the method of transferring a drawing onto a copper plate, as seen in the print *Diana at the Bath*.

The defining feature of Rembrandt's drawings is the freedom of the line. Etching is the printmaking technique that enables this spontaneity to be preserved.

Today, to produce an etching, the engraver covers a metal plate — either copper or zinc; copper was the metal used by Rembrandt — with a layer of varnish. Once the varnish has dried, the artist uses a very fine metal needle to draw on the plate, removing the varnish wherever a line is required. Once the drawing is finished, the engraver varnishes the back of the plate and immerses it in an acid bath. The acid only attacks the metal where the varnish has been removed, thereby etching the lines of the drawing into the plate. After the acid bath, the engraver removes the varnish, revealing lines incised into the metal. The plate is then covered in ink and the surface is wiped so that only the recessed lines remain inked. The plate is placed on the press, covered with damp paper and passed through under strong pressure. This forces the paper into the incised lines, transferring the ink and reproducing the engraved drawing onto the paper.

Collaboration with Jan van Vliet *

Rembrandt began printing his own plates as early as 1626, but it was not until 1628–1629 that he started to produce prints in earnest. Around 1629, he acquired a press and started working with the Leiden engraver Jan van Vliet. Van Vliet probably had more experience and technical mastery of engraving than Rembrandt, and this collaboration likely played a decisive role in Rembrandt's emergence as a printmaker during the years 1630–1631. It is possible — though this cannot be stated with certainty — that Jan van Vliet introduced Rembrandt to transparent hard varnish, such as the varnish used by luthiers, as employed by Jacques Callot, or even those used by carpenters or shipwrights. He may also have taught him how to transfer a drawing onto a

plate and how to use a burin. Jan van Vliet played a significant role in disseminating Rembrandt's work, promoting it through his own etchings. The two artists continued to collaborate after Rembrandt settled in Amsterdam. Rembrandt inspired Jan van Vliet's choice of subjects at this time, including beggars *(Beggar*, c. 1632), scenes of everyday life (*The Card Players*, c. 1634) and biblical scenes (*The Baptism of the Eunuch*, c. 1631). Although Jan van Vliet provided Rembrandt with solid technical knowledge of engraving, he lacked the imagination, originality and creativity that characterised Rembrandt's work.

By the time Rembrandt had perfected his etching technique with *Self-Portrait with a Hat and Ruff* in 1631, Jan van Vliet was already capable of etching with a comparable level of virtuosity, as evidenced by his prints *Lot and His Daughters*, *The Baptism of the Eunuch* and *Anna the Prophetess*.

***Lot and His Daughters* (c. 1631), {Rijksmuseum Amsterdam}**

Etching by Jan van Vliet after a drawing by Rembrandt or his workshop (*Lot and His Daughters*, c. 1631).

Rembrandt disliked drawing the same subject twice and etched his designs without reversing them in order to preserve the spontaneity of the line. Jan van Vliet probably introduced him to the technique of transferring a drawing onto a varnished plate before etching it, which he used for *Saint Paul in Meditation* and *Diana at the Bath* (this technique will be explained in the following chapter).

Jan van Vliet collaborated with Rembrandt on several etchings, notably *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* (c. 1631), and two of his largest plates: *The Great Descent from the Cross* (c. 1633) and *Christ before Pilate* (c. 1635).

Jan van Vliet played a key role in disseminating Rembrandt's work by etching it; printmaking was the only means of reproducing drawings or paintings in the 17th century. Examples of his work include *Lot and His Daughters* (c. 1631) and *Anna the Prophetess* (c. 1631–1634).

***Anne the Prophetess* (c. 1631–34), {Rijksmuseum Amsterdam}**

This etching by J. van Vliet reproduces the painting *Anne the Prophetess* by Rembrandt (c. 1631).

Anne the Prophetess **(c. 1631), {Rijksmuseum Amsterdam}**

Transfer of a drawing onto the varnish of a plate *

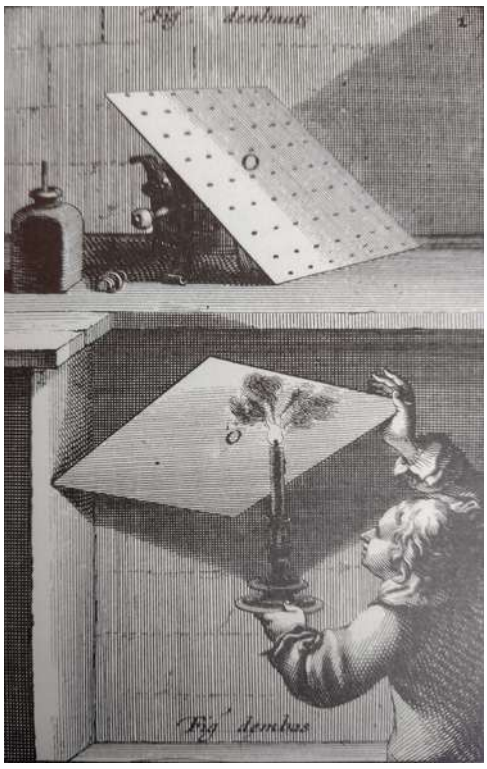
Until the mid-19th century, engraving was the only way to reproduce drawings, prints and paintings. It was an essential tool for raising an artist's profile.

In order to reproduce a drawing, print or painting through engraving, the reverse of the image to be reproduced must first be drawn. This can be done in a very simple way: after making the drawing on a relatively thin sheet of paper, coat the sheet with oil to make it translucent, then turn it over to see the reversed image. Next, the engraver must transfer the reversed drawing onto the varnished plate, ensuring that the impression on paper corresponds to the original drawing. Rembrandt, who sought to preserve the freedom of line and the spontaneity of an initial sketch, never made the same drawing twice when studying a subject or theme. He did not draw the reverse of the motif to be reproduced and worked directly on the plate without reversing the image. His prints therefore appear reversed, a fact that did not trouble him in the least.

Nevertheless, he occasionally transferred a drawing onto a plate by copying it onto the varnish. It is important to note that Rembrandt did not draw the reverse of the motif to be engraved, nor did he coat the sheet with oil. Instead, he simply transferred the drawing onto the plate so that the final impression was reversed in relation to the original. The principal aim for Rembrandt was to transfer the central figure of the scene to be etched. After beginning his collaboration with the Leiden engraver Jan van Vliet in 1629, Rembrandt learned the technique of transferring a drawing onto varnished metal while engraving Saint Paul in Meditation. He later refined this technique by producing Diana at the Bath (1630–1631). Jan van Vliet probably introduced him to this method, which we will explain based on the recommendations of Abraham Bosse (1645).

The first step is to :

- either **blacken the varnish** with candle smoke if using a hard varnish,



The art of blackening hard varnish with candle smoke

- or **whiten the varnish** if using soft or hard varnish. To do this, mix **white lead** (**ceruse**) with a small amount of Flemish glue. The mixture should

then be melted and heated in a small dish. Adding a few drops of ox bile improves the adhesion of the white to the varnish. The mixture can then be applied with a bristle brush or a large piece of cloth.

The second step is to :

- either cover a white sheet of paper with red chalk powder and rub it in well with the palm of your hand,
- or cover a white sheet of paper with black chalk or charcoal powder and rub it in well with the palm of your hand.

Third step :

- either, place the sheet coated in red chalk powder on either the blackened or whitened plate, ensuring the red chalk side is facing the varnish.
- or place the sheet coated with black chalk powder on the whitened plate, with the black chalk side facing the varnish.

Last step :

Create a tracing or counterproof of the reversed drawing to be etched on the varnished plate, as A. Bosse would have done. :

- place the sheet with the desired drawing on the varnished plate.
- trace over the lines of the drawing with a stylus, which has a metal point that is less sharp than those used to remove the varnish for etching. The drawing will then appear in red on a black or white background, or in black on a white background.

We will present the etching *Diana at the Bath*, which enabled Rembrandt to master the technique of transferring a drawing onto the varnish of a plate, following his initiation into printmaking with *Saint Paul Meditating*. Rembrandt sought above all to preserve the spontaneity and freedom of his line, and therefore used the technique of transferring a drawing onto a plate only very rarely. One may note the etching *The Good Samaritan* (c. 1633), which is a transfer of the painting *The Good Samaritan* (c. 1632–33) — see pages 46 and 47. He would return to this method much later to produce the portraits of Cornelis Claesz. Anslo (1641) and *Jan Six Reading* (1647). He compensated for this apparent loss of freedom with an exceptional technical mastery, particularly evident in the engraving *Jan Six Reading*.

Diana at the Bath

Diana at the Bath (c. 1630–31 according to Benesch, B 21), {British Museum, London}. Rembrandt depicts Diana without her nymphs. He represents her as an ordinary model, such as one might have posed in his studio. This approach is characteristic of Rembrandt, who sought to portray life and the human body as they are, without embellishment or false modesty. This drawing is highly finished and corresponds to the third stage in Rembrandt's study of a subject, with the background scarcely suggested. It was this drawing that Rembrandt used as the model to be transferred onto the plate for the etching *Diana at the Bath*.

Diana at the Bath

To etch this plate, Rembrandt faithfully transferred the drawing of *Diana at the Bath*. Compared to the drawing, he elaborated the background by adding a tree and foliage, and introduced additional attributes indicating that the figure is Diana, goddess of the hunt. Diana is generally depicted with a crescent moon on her head. In the case of a transfer, the final print is identical to the original drawing, except that it appears reversed. It is important to note that in Rembrandt's oeuvre, he used the same drawing for two different stages only in the case of a transfer intended for etching a plate, which is relatively rare in his printed work. An etching resulting from a transfer loses the free and improvised character that Rembrandt valued above all else.

***Jan Six Reading* (c. 1647), {Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam}**

To create this engraving, Rembrandt transferred a drawing of Jan Six reading. Although he sacrificed the freedom of the line, he made up for this with his exceptional technical mastery, capturing subtle variations in shades of grey and dark areas. The engraving was initially created using the etching technique and was later enhanced using burin and drypoint.

The Refinement of His Etching Technique * Self-Portrait with Hat and Ruff (1631)

Self-Portrait with Hat and Ruff is the first etched self-portrait in which Rembrandt depicts himself as an important figure, shortly before he settled in Amsterdam. It was probably the print produced in the largest edition for commercial distribution. After moving to Amsterdam in 1632, Rembrandt's reputation began to grow and many people wished to acquire a portrait of the artist. This self-portrait thus served as a paid « calling card », enabling him to promote himself and increase his fame.

Rembrandt refined his etching technique while creating this self-portrait. The various stages of his work illustrate the principles and method behind it, as the following illustrations show. Today, three drawn studies and fifteen distinct etched states of this self-portrait are known. Without attempting to present them all, we will examine four etched states and two drawn studies. Together, these highlight the scale of the effort involved, as well as the delicacy and virtuosity that Rembrandt had to employ to produce this work. To create this print, the artist used a transparent varnish, which enabled him to carry out numerous successive acid bites. He prepared these by using etching needles of varying fineness to remove the varnish and adjusting the duration of the acid bites to achieve lines of different thicknesses. Rembrandt burnished certain areas when necessary to rework them, deepening the shadows with the burin and/or drypoint.

This self-portrait demonstrates the remarkable progress that Rembrandt made in etching between 1630 and 1631, following the start of his collaboration with the engraver Jan van Vliet, despite having experimented with the technique for several years.

When he began this self-portrait, he did not yet have a clear idea of the final form it would take. At first, Rembrandt simply etched his head, wearing a hat.

***Self-Portrait with Hat and Ruff*, {Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam}**

Etching. He made several prints, which allowed him to draw and plan the next stages of his etch. Three preliminary drawings survive, two of which we will present.

***Self-Portrait with Hat and Ruff*, {British Museum, London}**

Drawing (Benesch, B 57; Schatborn & Hinterding, D 208a). This is the first study for his self-portrait, using the print from the first stage, Rembrandt envisaged and sketched the next steps in the printmaking process. This study is in black chalk. AET 24 stands for « *Aetatis suae 24* », meaning « *at the age of 24* ». As the drawing was made in 1631, it was probably created in the early part of the year, before Rembrandt's birthday on 15 July.

***Self-Portrait with Hat and Ruff,* {Bibliothèque nationale, Paris}**

Drawing (Schatborn & Hinterding, D 208b). A second study in black chalk. It should be noted that these two studies differ from the final version chosen by Rembrandt.

***Self-Portrait with Hat and Ruff,* {Bibliothèque nationale, Paris}**

Etching. At this stage, Rembrandt had outlined the figure and the general shape of its attire, but had not worked on the details of the clothing or the background of the plate. He was satisfied enough with this stage to sign it in the top left-hand corner, a signature that would disappear in later stages and would not become the plate's final signature.

***Self-Portrait with Hat and Ruff*, {Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam}**

Etching. After designing the embroidery for his garment, Rembrandt worked on the background of the plate to create depth and lighting effects. The ruff is still unfinished.

***Self-Portrait with Hat and Ruff*, {Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam}**

Etching. This stage corresponds to the final version of the print. Rembrandt finished the ruff and signed the plate in the top right-hand corner.

This etching was followed by two painted self-portraits in 1632: a first *Self-Portrait with Hat and Ruff* (1632a) and a second *Self-Portrait with Hat and Ruff* (1632b).

A study of the representation of faces and emotional expression *

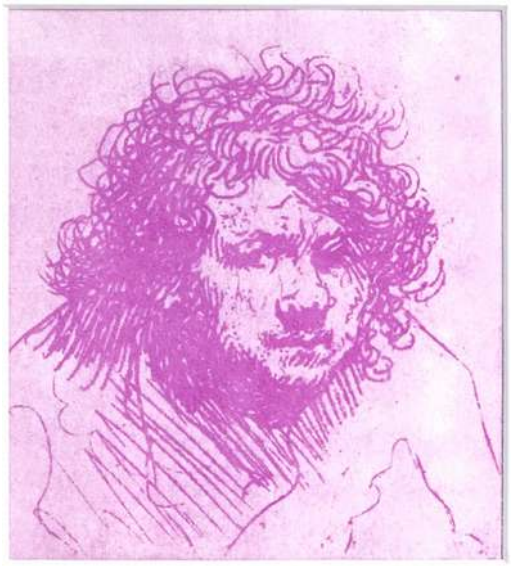
Rembrandt incorporated his earliest self-portraits into group paintings. Examples include his self-portrait in *The Stoning of Saint Stephen* (1625), *Historical Scene* (1626), *Let the Little Children Come to Me* (1627) and *David Presenting the Head of Goliath to Saul* (1627). The painting *The Artist in His Studio* (1628) should also be mentioned, even though it is not strictly a self-portrait. Between 1628 and 1631, Rembrandt produced a further eight self-portraits.

In his earliest self-portraits, Rembrandt reveals the essential traits of his personality with remarkable naturalness. In *Self-Portrait as a Laughing Soldier* (c. 1628), he shows his playful nature, with its sense of humour, taste for festivity and disguise, and lack of fear of self-mockery. In *Self-Portrait with Shaded Face* (c. 1628) and *Self-Portrait with Open Mouth* (c. 1629), Rembrandt only depicts part of his face, leaving his eyes immersed in shadow. This unusual approach suggests a combination of timidity and mischievousness, with a hint of provocation. Indeed, he seems to suggest: « *You do not see me, but I see you* ». In *Self-Portrait with a Feathered Beret* (c. 1629) and *Self-Portrait in Oriental Costume with a Dog* (c. 1631), Rembrandt plays with the idea of disguise. He would retain this attitude, marked by mischievousness and provocation, in certain of his self-portraits throughout his life. In contrast, in his earliest etched self-portraits from the Leiden period, much of his face is obscured by heavily accentuated shadows. This does not stem from a fully mastered expressive choice, but rather from his imperfect command of etching, a technique he was discovering at the time. He had not yet mastered tonal gradations or rendering detail in dark areas.

Rembrandt's series of self-portraits highlights his extraordinary imagination; he never depicted the same subject in quite the same way twice. It should also be noted that, when creating a self-portrait, Rembrandt would look at himself in a mirror, meaning the final drawing or painting would be reversed. In the case of etched self-portraits, however, the printed impressions are not reversed, and Rembrandt appears as he would have been observed. When etching from a preparatory drawing, he did not reverse the latter in order to preserve the spontaneity of the line. The drawing transferred onto the plate was therefore reversed, producing a non-reversed image upon printing. Similarly,

when he etched directly onto the plate while looking at his reflection in a mirror without creating a preparatory drawing first, the image incised on the plate was reversed and the resulting impression produced a non-reversed self-portrait once again. While most preparatory drawings have disappeared, there are several examples of etchings produced from a preparatory drawing that are not reversed, meaning the impressions correspond to non-reversed portraits of Rembrandt. Finally, some of the etched self-portraits may have been produced in collaboration with Jan van Vliet or his pupils, and a few may in fact be portraits executed by them.

Alongside the development of his etching technique, Rembrandt expanded his exploration of facial representation and emotional expression. To illustrate this and assess the remarkable progress he achieved between 1629 and 1631, we will examine two self-portraits with the head uncovered, two with the head covered and two showing different emotional expressions.



***Self-Portrait Leaning Forward*, {Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam}**

Etching, c. 1629. This is one of Rembrandt's earliest self-portraits in this medium. It remains quite rudimentary. There are numerous small ink spots visible on the impression, which may be due to the plate not being polished sufficiently, or to Rembrandt's imperfect control of the varnish application process. This print is related to two paintings: *Self-Portrait with Shaded Face* (c. 1628) and *Self-Portrait* (c. 1629).

***Self-Portrait with Flying Hair*, {Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam}**
Etching c. 1631.

***Self-Portrait with Fur Cap*, {Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam}**
Etching, c. 1629. Rembrandt had not yet mastered the subtleties of tonal gradation or the precise rendering of details in shadowed and dark areas.

***Self-Portrait with a Thick Fur Hat*, {Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam}**
Etching, c. 1631

***Self-Portrait with Open Mouth or Screaming*, {Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam}**

Etching, c. 1629. Rembrandt depicts himself screaming. This etching was made from the drawing *Self-Portrait with Open Mouth*. It is another example of a non-reversed print of a self-portrait, as Rembrandt engraved his plate without reversing his preparatory drawing.

Self-Portrait with Wide-Open Eyes, {Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam}
Etching, c. 1630. This self-portrait conveys astonishment and surprise.

Rembrandt practised expressing emotions and feelings through self-portraiture. Later in his career, he became renowned for depicting a variety of emotions and sentiments in scenes featuring groups of people, as well as animals and landscapes. We will present three etchings produced to illustrate this exceptional ability of Rembrandt's, which is characteristic of Baroque aesthetics: *Self-Portrait as a Beggar* (1630), *The Sleeping Shepherd* (1644) and *Joseph Telling His Dreams* (1638). The etching *The Sleeping Shepherd* was previously featured in « Rembrandt the Draftsman » (p. 47).

Self-Portrait as a Beggar **(1630), {Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam}**

Etching. During one of his walks, Rembrandt probably encountered a beggar who resembled him. This inspired him to portray himself as a beggar, suggesting that he cared for the poor. The citizens of Amsterdam were Puritans who accepted freedom of thought, but not freedom of conduct. « *In 1613, the Amsterdam municipality banned all begging and opened two institutions for forced rehabilitation: the Raphuis for men and the Spinhuis for women. The beggar was no longer the poor man of the Middle Ages who helped the rich secure their salvation; rather, they were seen as antisocial figures whose existence was perceived as a threa*t » (Renouard de Bussierre, 1986). This self-portrait as a beggar could have been seen as a provocation, but for Rembrandt, it was a way of expressing his desire for freedom within a rigid society. Although the seventeenth century is described as a « Golden Age » for Amsterdam and the Netherlands, the quality of that gold was not the same for great merchants, arms dealers, burghers, and the destitute poor.

Joseph Telling His Dreams, {Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam}

Etching, 1638. Rembrandt first explored this theme in an oil painting on paper in 1633. Five years later, he revisited the subject in an etching without reversing the composition. In the story, Joseph, the favourite son of Jacob, has two dreams: first, the sheaves from his brothers' harvest bow down before his own, and then he sees the sun, the moon, and eleven stars bow down before him. Innocently, he recounts his dreams to his father, brothers and neighbours

— the very moment that Rembrandt chose to depict. Jealous of their father's preference for Joseph, his brothers began to hate him after hearing these dreams. Later, Jacob sent Joseph to join his brothers, who then kidnapped him and sold him as a slave to the Midianites, a people from Arabia who led caravans travelling to Egypt. Rembrandt returned to this theme in a small etching measuring 8 × 11 cm without reversing the design of the painting, meaning the print appears reversed in relation to the painting. This etching is a model of virtuosity and was highly admired during Rembrandt's lifetime.

Joseph, surrounded by his father, brothers and neighbours, recounts his latest dreams. The scene includes thirteen figures, twelve of whom are visible. The diversity of the characters' expressions is striking.

Hercules Segers and Rembrandt

Although Rembrandt and Hercules Segers did not live in Amsterdam at the same time, Rembrandt was familiar with Segers' work and held it in the highest regard, finding it inspiring. Rembrandt admired Segers for his daring explorations, exceptional engraving technique and the originality, creativity, independence and freedom of his style.

Hercules Segers (Haarlem, c. 1589–1590; Amsterdam, c. 1637–1638) was a highly original painter and engraver, as well as being one of the most important innovators in the field of engraving. His life was difficult; he experienced bankruptcy and a tragic end. Having turned to alcohol in his final years, he reportedly died after falling down a staircase. In his *Introduction to the the Great School of Painting*, Samuel van Hoogstraten presents Segers as a solitary genius who was poor and misunderstood.

***The Mossy Tree (c. 1626–30)*, {Rijksmuseum Amsterdam}**

Hercules Segers is arguably the most distinctive Dutch painter and engraver of the Golden Age. Examples of his work include *The Mossy Tree* (etching and watercolour), as well as the paintings *The River in the Valley* {Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam} and *Mountain Landscape* {Bredius Museum, The Hague}.

***The River in the Valley (c. 1626-30)*, {Rijksmuseum Amsterdam}**

Hercules Segers drew inspiration from the tradition of imaginary and fantastical painting established by the German painter and engraver Albrecht Altdorfer (c. 1480–1538). Altdorfer made landscape the main subject of his work, as can be seen in *The Spruce* (an etching enhanced with watercolour), *Mountain Landscape with Tree* (a painting) and *Mountain Landscape*. As an engraver, Segers conducted extensive experimental research in engraving techniques, particularly aquatint, which is created using rosin powder, and printing processes. When an artist conceives a work, they may have multiple variations in mind. A spectacular example of this creative process can be seen in Pablo Picasso's work in the documentary « Le Mystère Picasso » by Henri-Georges Clouzot (from the 44th minute onwards). Segers used engraving to bring these variations to life, considering each print a work in its own right. He believed that each print could be unique; indeed, his engravings became veritable paintings. Typically, Typically, once the plate has been engraved, the engraver entrusted it to a printer, who is responsible for producing a series of identical proofs. Segers, however, was directly involved in the printing process. He could prepare the paper by painting it with watercolours, use different coloured inks for the same plate, enhance the prints with watercolours or oils after printing, print on fabric or cut the proofs to change their format. He also produced **counter-proofs**, a process involving replacing the copper plate with the freshly printed print and pressing it again with a new sheet. The counter-proof is inverted in relation to the original print and has paler colours. We will

present six variations of the etching *Landscape with a Fir Branch*.

***Landscape with a Fir Branch* (c. 1622–25), {Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam}**

The first variant is an etching printed in dark blue ink on yellowish-grey prepared cotton, which is then coloured in various shades of brown, green, bluish-green and greyish-blue. This is an excellent example of a Segers print that resembles a painting. The second variant is an etching printed on cream-coloured prepared paper. Hercules Segers uses a plate that he has just printed and, rather than inking it again, oils it before printing a proof. Over time, the oil turns brown {Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam}. Third variant : an etching printed in dark brown ink on purple-brown prepared paper {Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam}. Fourth variant : an etching printed in blue ink on light brown tinted paper {Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam}. Fifth variant : an etching printed in black ink on light grey paper. After printing, the print is completed with blue and brown watercolours {Rembrandt House Museum, Amsterdam}. Sixth variant : Counterproof of a print in green ink on yellow-brown cotton with oil paint additions {Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam}.

This extreme singularity meant that H. Segers was not well-known to the general public, but he was admired by a small circle of fellow painters and engravers, including Rembrandt. It should be noted that Rembrandt also considered the various versions of his work, meaning he never drew the same scene twice.

Rembrandt owned eight paintings and several prints of etchings by Hercules Segers, including the plate *Tobias and the Angel*.

Segers influenced Rembrandt's work in both painting and etching :

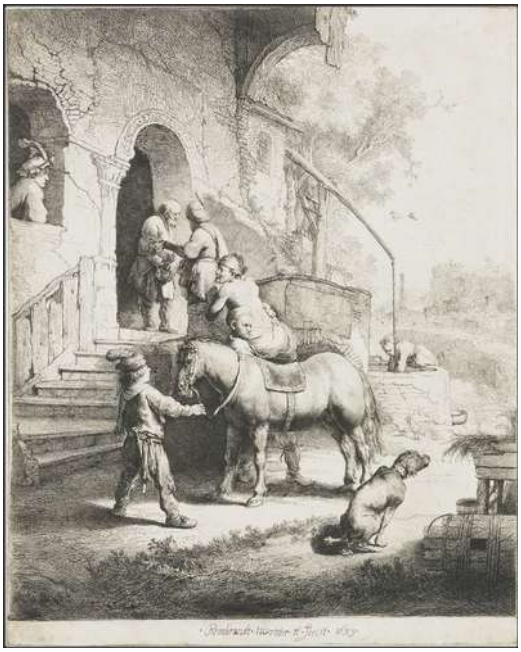
- 1) **Painting** : Segers' landscapes, with their skies, light and atmosphere, inspired Rembrandt in his own landscapes, such as *Stormy Landscape* (1638) {Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum, Brunswick}, *The Stone Bridge* (1638) {Rijksmuseum Amsterdam} and *The Good Samaritan* p. 49 (1638) {Czartoryski Museum, Krakow}. Examples of Segers' work include *Mountain Landscape* {Uffizi Gallery, Florence}, which was purchased and reworked by Rembrandt, and *River in the Valley* p.43 {Rijksmuseum Amsterdam}.
- 2a) **Etching :** Before Rembrandt, the ultimate goal of the etching technique was to achieve a result comparable to that of engraving with a burin (A. Bosse, 1645). For Rembrandt, however, the appeal of etching lay in its ability to achieve all the nuances possible in painting and to create true etched paintings, rich in gradations and details in shadows and dark areas. Very soon after perfecting his etching technique (around 1631), Rembrandt's etchings became comparable to paintings capable of translating and describing scenes from life, such as *The Rat Catcher* (1632), or biblical scenes such as *The Great Resurrection of Lazarus* (1632) and *The Good Samaritan* (1633) and *The Descent from the Cross* (1633). These etchings allowed Rembrandt to give free rein to his imagination and creativity. Although Rembrandt's prints became true paintings, unlike those of H. Segers, Rembrandt achieved this result without adding colour to the paper, either before or after printing.

The rat Catcher **(c. 1632), {Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam}**

The Resurrection of Lazarus (c. 1630) {Musée du comté de Los Angeles}

The Great Resurrection of Lazarus **(c. 1632), {Rijksmuseum Amsterdam}**

Etching. It is worth noting that Rembrandt does not merely reproduce the corresponding painting ; he offers a fresh interpretation of the scene. He reworks the composition without inverting the drawing, thus affirming the autonomy of etching in relation to painting, as well as demonstrating his interest in the medium's unique potential.



The Good Samaritan **(c. 1633), {Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam}**

This etching (25 × 21 cm) depicts a biblical scene set by Rembrandt in a rural setting. In the foreground, he has added the deliberately trivial detail of a

dog relieving itself. This addition is characteristic of Rembrandt's facetious and provocative temperament; he did not hesitate to combine the sacred with the everyday in order to challenge traditional conventions of religious representation.

***The Good Samaritan* (c. 1633), {Wallace Collection, London}**

Painting on a wooden panel (24.2 x 19.8 cm). Note the strong similarity with the corresponding etching, except for the inversion of the composition. To create this piece, Rembrandt made a counterproof of the printed etching and transferred it onto a wood panel with a white painted background. This process is comparable to that used for the sixth variant of Hercules Segers' *Landscape with a Fir Tree* (see p. 44). When executing the painting, Rembrandt removed certain elements from the foreground that were present in the etching, notably the dog. This simplified the scene and subtly altered its narrative balance.

Landscape with the Good Samaritan **(c. 1638), {Czartoryski Museum, Krakow}**

Painting. Rembrandt revisits the theme of the Good Samaritan in this landscape, which was inspired by Hercules Segers's landscape paintings.

Descent from the Cross **(c. 1632–1633), {Alte Pinakothek, Munich}**

Painting. In this scene, Rembrandt places a self-portrait of himself as the man in blue supporting Christ's right arm. He would engrave this theme a year later.

***The Descent from the Cross* (c. 1633), {Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam}**

Etching. In this scene, Rembrandt places a self-portrait of himself as the man on the ladder supporting Christ. He revisited this theme a year later.

***Descent from the Cross* (c. 1634), {Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg}**

Compare Rembrandt's versions, which were influenced by Rubens' works: Descent from the Cross (c. 1611–12) (Hermitage Museum, Saint

Petersburg); Descent from the Cross (c. 1612–14) (Cathedral of Our Lady, Antwerp); and Descent from the Cross (c. 1616–17) (Museum of Fine Arts, Lille).

- 2b) Unlike most engravers, who entrusted their plates to a printer for the production of prints, Rembrandt produced his own proofs, as did Hercules Segers. He repeatedly experimented with prints using different coloured inks, taking great care when wiping the ink to accentuate contrasts (dark areas were wiped less than light or white areas), create varied atmospheres, and influence the choice of paper for the print. Rembrandt favoured paper from China or Japan (see the following paragraph, « Rembrandt and the Etching Technique », for more information). Finally, he reworked Segers' *Tobias and the Angel* (c. 1630–1633) plate to create *The Flight into Egypt* (c. 1653), retaining the landscape.

Tobias and the Angel **(c. 1630–33), {Rijksmuseum Amsterdam}**

Etching. A print from a plate by Hercules Segers that belonged to Rembrandt. Note how the ink has smudged in the sky, creating a very distinctive atmosphere.

The Flight into Egypt **(c. 1653), {Rijksmuseum Amsterdam}**

Etching. Rembrandt erased part of Hercules Segers' plate, namely the figures of Tobias and the angel, and retained much of the landscape, transforming it into *The Flight into Egypt*.

The Flight into Egypt **(c. 1653), {Rijksmuseum Amsterdam}**

Etching. This print differs from the previous one in two ways: less ink has

been wiped off, and a different type of paper has been used. Note the very different atmospheres created by these two prints.

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Rembrandt and the Technique of Etching

Many painter-engravers commissioned professional engravers and printers to create their engravings. The painter-engraver would provide the engraver with the design they wanted engraved. The engraver would then usually engrave the plate using a burin, reversing the original design, before making the prints. An example of this process can be seen in Abraham Bosse's 1642 engraving depicting a printer's workshop.

The Printer's Workshop (A. Bosse, c. 1645)

In the background, we can see a printer inking a plate. In the foreground, on the left, we can see a printer wiping excess ink from the plate before

printing. On the right, we can see a printer printing the plate after it has been inked and wiped.

For Rembrandt, the processes of etching and printing the plate were too important to entrust to an engraver-printer. To preserve the freedom and spontaneity of his lines, he primarily used the etching technique and did not invert his drawings. He rarely resorted to transferring a drawing. Engraving allowed him to express his imagination, fantasy, and research freely (see the exceptional example of his study of volume representation in the Portrait of Jan Cornelis Sylvius, 'Rembrandt the draughtsman', p. 41). Influenced by Hercules Segers, Rembrandt experimented with different coloured inks (see Christ and the Woman of Samaria (c. 1634), The Death of the Virgin (c. 1639), Blind Tobit (c. 1651) and David in Prayer (c. 1652) in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam), as well as various printing media and types of paper. He particularly liked paper from China or Japan, and he even made prints on parchment.

Christ and the Woman of Samaria (c. 1634), {Rijksmuseum Amsterdam}

Etching: an example of a coloured ink print.

Blind Tobit (c. 1651), {Rijksmuseum Amsterdam}

Etching : a print made with coloured ink.

***Christ Driving the Merchants from the Temple* (c. 1635), {Rijksmuseum Amsterdam}**

Etching: Rembrandt made this print on parchment.

The hundred guilder coin **(c. 1648), {Rijksmuseum Amsterdam}**

Etching: This print was made on Japanese paper.

After perfecting his etching technique, Rembrandt realised that he could create details and nuances in the shadows and dark areas by applying several successive acid attacks using a transparent varnish. To achieve subtle effects of light and shadow and precise details in dark areas, Rembrandt supplemented the etching technique with the burin and/or drypoint. First, he used the etching to construct and place dark areas of uniform intensity (see the first plate of The Jewish Woman, p. 57). He then continued working on these areas to create gradations and highlights (see the second plate of The Jewish Woman and the two plates of The Draughtsman after a Model, p. 58). Examples of etchings produced using several successive attacks include View of Amsterdam (c. 1641, p. 18), Man Drawing from a Plaster Cast (c. 1641) and Christ before Pilate (c. 1635).

The Jewish Woman **(c. 1635), {Rijksmuseum Amsterdam}**

Prints from an intermediate and final stages of the plate. We can see how Rembrandt reworks the dark areas and brings out the light in them. Note the extreme delicacy of the work on the face, hair, hands, and clothing.

The Draughtsman after a Model **(c. 1639), {Rijksmuseum Amsterdam}**

Although the plate was left unfinished, these two intermediate stages offer valuable insights into Rembrandt's etching process.

Finally, he worked on the plate using a burin and/or drypoint. Five of Rembrandt's most remarkable and technically advanced etchings are: The Annunciation to the Shepherds (1634), The Weigher of Gold (c. 1639), The Three Trees (c. 1643), Portrait of J. Six (c. 1647), and The Hundred Guilder Print (c. 1648). Generally, an etching allows for between one hundred and one hundred and fifty prints to be made.

In the drypoint technique, lines are engraved directly into a metal plate using a steel needle. Examples of etchings completed using this technique include *The Death of the Virgin* (c. 1639) and *Christ Crucified Between Two Thieves* (c. 1641). Rembrandt used drypoint to achieve the deepest blacks. An etching produced using drypoint can generally only be printed about fifteen times, as the pressure of the press quickly crushes the relatively soft copper ridges. From 1648 onwards, Rembrandt increasingly used drypoint in his engravings, even producing some works using this technique alone, which confused his admirers and collectors. Examples include the landscapes *The Grove* and T*he Canal*, both c. 1652, and the engraving *Ecce Homo*, c. 1655, of which only eight copies were made.

In engraving with a burin, a tool designed to incise lines into a metal plate, the artist uses a burin. Examples of etchings completed with a burin include The Descent from the Cross (c. 1633) and Christ before Pilate (c. 1635). Generally, an etching completed with a burin allows for between one hundred and one hundred and fifty prints to be made.

To work on his plates, Rembrandt would sometimes use a print on which he would draw. Example of this technique can be seen in *Self-Portrait with Hat and Collar* presented in the section entitled « The development of the etching technique » and *Portrait of Rembrandt's Mother*,

Portrait of Rembrandt's Mother **(c. 1628), {Rijksmeseum Amsterdam}**

In the case of very complex plates, Rembrandt created a counterproof that he then used as a drawing surface. As a reversed print, the counterproof visually corresponds to the etching as it appears on the copper plate. Once he had finalised his drawing on the counterproof, he simply had to redraw it on the varnish of the plate to create a new state. There are very few examples of this process. One notable example is the counterproof of the first state of the plate *The Gold Weigher* {The Baltimore Museum of Art}.

If necessary, Rembrandt would use the burnisher-scraper to erase part of the plate. First, he would use the triangular-shaped scraper with sharp edges to remove excess metal and scrape the copper around the lines. He would then use the burnisher, which was rounded and smooth, to flatten the copper and erase the marks left by the engraved lines and the scratches made by the scraper. This was a particularly long and delicate process, especially since the plates used by Rembrandt were quite thin. This enabled him to transform large parts of the plate in order to rework them and significantly alter the treatment of the subject. Examples include *Self-Portrait with Hat and Collar* (c. 1631), particularly with regard to the embroidery before and after the intervention. Much later, there were significant transformations in *The Flight into Egypt*, based on a plate by Hercules Segers (c. 1630–1633); *The Three Crosses* (c. 1653), first and fourth states (p. 60); and *Christ Presented in the Temple* (c. 1655), third and seventh states (p. 61). Erasing part of a plate with a burnisher was a considerable task, demonstrating that only the final result mattered to Rembrandt, regardless of the effort required.

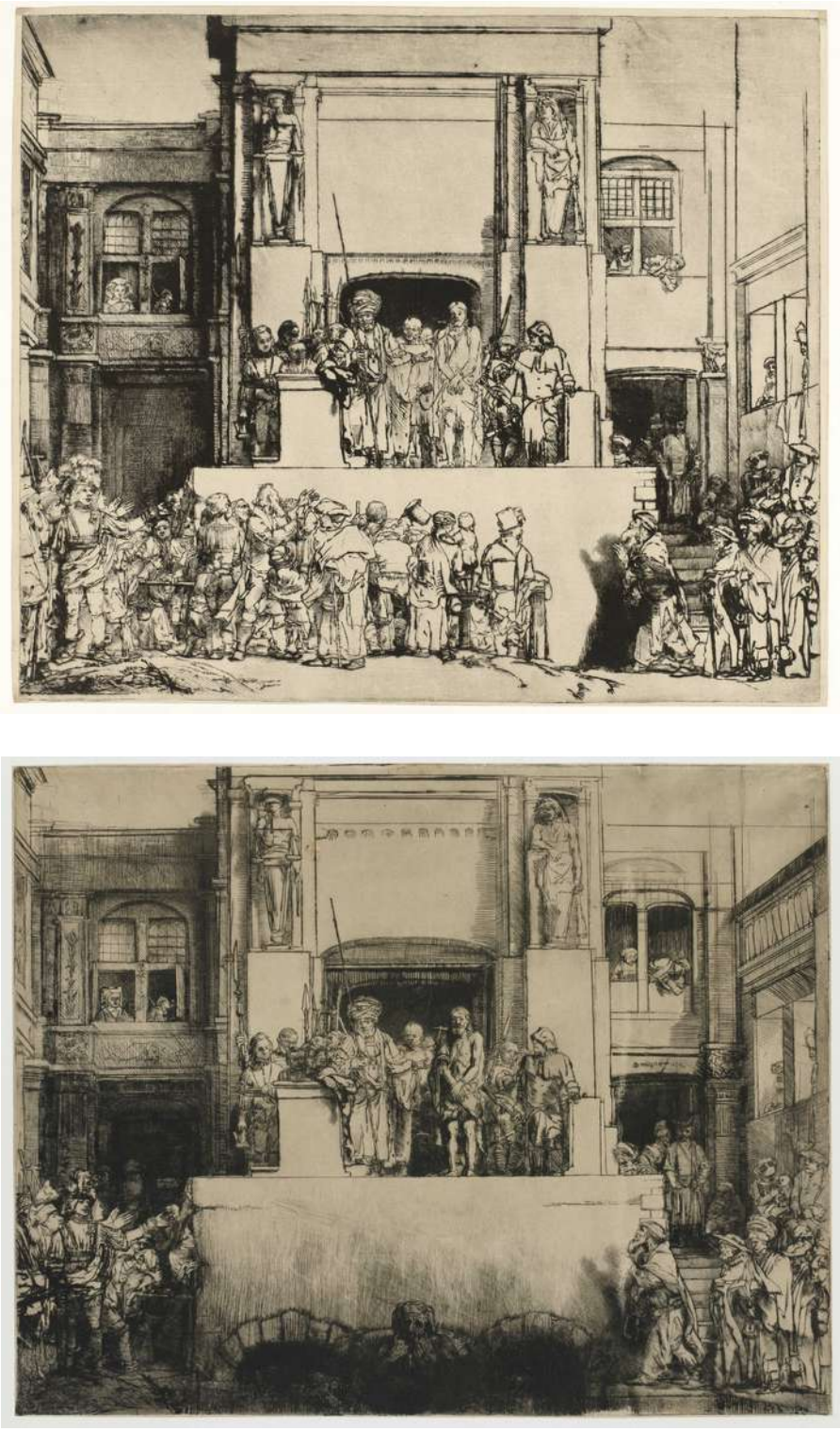
For Rembrandt, there were no set rules; the only thing that mattered was achieving the desired result. He adapted his techniques and approach to suit the subject and the outcome he wanted.

Following his bankruptcy, the seizure of his printing press, and his move in 1660, he was unable to re-establish a well-equipped engraving workshop, producing only two engravings.

Unlike Albrecht Dürer, Rembrandt never engraved woodcuts, most likely because wood engraving does not offer the same freedom of line as etching.

***The Three Crosses (c. 1653)*, {Rijksmuseum Amsterdam}**

Prints from the first and fourth states of the plate. Rembrandt completely reworked the engraving between these two states, creating entirely different atmospheres. These reworkings demonstrate the considerable amount of work Rembrandt put in and show just how much of a researcher he was.

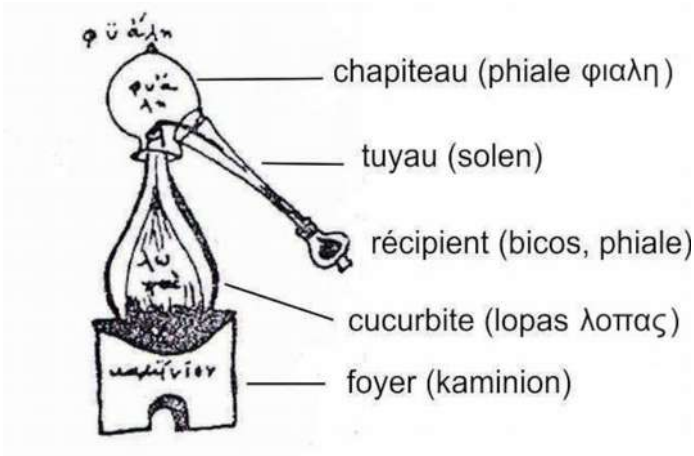


***Ecce Homo (c. 1655)*, {Rijksmuseum Amsterdam}**

An engraving also known as « *Christ Presented in the Temple* ». There are seven different states of this plate, which was engraved using drypoint only. The two prints shown here were made on Japanese paper. Rembrandt left his familiar world of etching to explore a new one.

Ingredients used

Significant progress was made over the centuries when alchemists used exudates — substances secreted by certain plants, such as pine resin — and subjected them to distillation. The use of resins, like distillation, has been practised since ancient times. Pliny the Elder (23–79 CE) wrote that liquid pitch could be extracted by distilling the resin of Swiss pine, spruce and oriental trees, such as terebinth, mastic and cypress. This liquid pitch was used in Egypt for mummifying bodies. It could also be reduced by fire, coagulated with vinegar and used to waterproof amphorae. The Greeks caulked ships with a mixture of pitch and wax, and also used distillation to produce various spirits. The first still was described in the 4th century by the Greek alchemist Zosimus.



Zosimus's still **(4th century)**

Over the following centuries, distillation was used to purify substances and create new products, such as ethyl alcohol (known in the Middle Ages as ‘eau-de-vie’ or ‘eau ardente’), essential oils (also called plant essences) and esters used in perfumery. The distillation of petroleum has been documented since the 7th century. In 1500, the German alchemist Jérôme Brunschwig (c. 1450–1512) published the first treatise devoted entirely to distillation.

Among the exudates used were:

- *Gum arabic*, which is extracted from acacia trees, has been used since prehistoric times as a binder for water-based paints, such as cave paintings, gouache and watercolours.
- *Vegetable resins* are extracted mainly from certain conifers. Distilling them produces essential oils, also known as vegetable essences, as well as

a solid or highly viscous residue.

Units

The units used in this paragraph are :

- The Paris pint : ≈ 0.952 litres
- The Paris pound : ≈ 490 g
- The quarteron = 1/4 pound ≈ 123 g
- The ounce = 1/16 pound ≈ 31 g

Etching

For manufacturing :

- 1) To obtain an etching solution (nitric acid) for etching copper plates, the following ingredients were mixed together:
  - vinegar ;
  - ammonium chloride;
  - sea salt;
  - verdigris (a product of copper corrosion), also known as copper green (A. Bosse, 1645).

  This mixture can be used for etching with both hard and soft varnishes.

  Preparation
  take three pints of white vinegar, six ounces each of ammonium chloride and common salt, and four ounces of verdigris. Finely grind the solids, place them in a pot and bring the mixture to the boil, stirring continuously. After boiling the mixture two or three times, you will obtain an etching solution. Leave this to cool and stand for one or two days before use.
  To moderate its action, add one or two glasses of the white vinegar used in its preparation.

  Another type of etching solution was used to separate gold from silver and copper. It was called « eau de départ » (starting water). Sold by refiners, it was made from vitriol (iron sulphate) and saltpetre. However, it could only be used on soft varnish as it dissolved hard varnish.

- 2) To prepare **the mixture of tallow and oil** used to cover the areas of the plates that should not be attacked by the etching solution, you will need:
  - Olive oil, which prevents the tallow from solidifying as it cools.
  - Tallow obtained from the fat of herbivorous animals (such as sheep or cattle), collected by melting.

  Tallow has traditionally been used in the production of candles, ointments, soaps and lubricants, particularly for wooden mill mechanisms.

  Preparation: Candle tallow is mixed with hot oil. The tallow then melts in the oil. Enough oil must be added to ensure the mixture remains liquid after cooling.

- 3) **To make the hard, transparent varnish used by luthiers** such as Jacques Callot, you will need :
  - clear, fatty **linseed oil** (the kind used by painters).
  - pulverised **mastic resin**.

  Mastic resin is extracted from the mastic tree (Pistacia lentiscus), a shrub native to the Mediterranean region also known as the lentisk tree. As well as being used to make the hard transparent varnish used by J. Callot, it is also used to prepare soft varnishes, oil-resin mediums, and varnishes for oil painting. This resin was favoured by P. P. Rubens. The chia variety from the island of Chios in Greece has been the most renowned since ancient times.

  Preparation:
  Heat a quarter pound of linseed oil and add a quarter pound of pulverised mastic tears. The mixture is stirred until the mastic has completely dissolved. The resulting mixture is then filtered through a clean, fine cloth and poured into a glass bottle, which is carefully sealed to preserve the varnish.

- J. Callot's hard varnish can be diluted with turpentine. It differs from the thin varnishes used in oil painting in that it contains linseed oil; however, it can still be used as a medium in oil painting.

- Turpentine resin has been produced since ancient times from the terebinth

tree. This resin is distilled to produce turpentine and rosin, which is also known as arcanson in Gascon. Similar resins were obtained from other conifers, including various species of pine, as well as spruce, larch and fir.

- a) Turpentine is used as a solvent in engraving and in the production of hard varnishes, such as those used by J. Callot, as well as certain soft varnishes. It is also used in oil painting for preparing mediums and varnishes.
  b) Rosin, also known as white pitch, has been used since ancient times. In engraving, it is used for the production of certain soft varnishes and, when reduced to powder, for aquatints.

- 4) ***Soft varnishes***. There are many recipes for making soft varnishes (see the 1743 edition of A. Bosse's treatise for details). Here, we present one of these recipes, attributed to Jacques Callot.

- **Jacques Callot's soft varnish**. To prepare this varnish, you will need:
  - virgin beeswax that is very white and clean;
  - amber or calcined spalt (calcined bitumen);
  - mastic (see the preparation of J. Callot's hard varnish);
  - resin pitch (archaic spelling: poix raisine) or shoemaker's pitch.

- **<u>Preparation:</u>**
  You will need:
  - Half a quarteron of virgin beeswax,
  - Half a quarteron of amber or calcined spalt (calcined bitumen),
  - Half a quarteron of mastic (if working in summer, since it hardens the varnish) or one ounce of mastic (if working in winter),
  - One ounce of resin pitch,
  - One ounce of shoemaker's pitch,
  - Half an ounce of turpentine.

  When all the materials are ready, melt the wax by heating it. Then, gradually add the pitches and finally the powdered ingredients, stirring the mixture constantly throughout. Once the mixture is completely melted and homogeneous, pour it into cold, clear water. Knead the mixture into balls and store them in a dust-free place.

  J. Callot's soft varnish can be thinned with turpentine oil (see the

preparation of the hard varnish used by J. Callot).

- **Wax :**
  For a long time, the term 'wax' referred specifically to the substance secreted by bees. However, waxes can also be obtained from other sources, such as spermaceti from the sperm whale (also known as 'whale's fat'), oil from the orange roughy (Hoplostethus atlanticus) and certain vegetable oils, most notably jojoba.

  In printmaking, wax is used to create a small retaining wall along the edge of the plate. Once the plate is placed horizontally on a table, acid is poured onto the enclosed surface. Wax is also used in the production of soft varnishes.

  In painting, wax is used to prepare matte varnishes.

- **Amber** :
  Amber is fossilised resin secreted by conifers or flowering plants millions of years ago. It comes in a variety of colours. In printmaking, amber is used to prepare soft varnishes, while in oil painting it is used to make mediums, varnishes and glazes. Salvador Dalí notably favoured amber for glaze work.

  Amber has been known since prehistoric times and fragments have been discovered in the Altamira Cave, dating back to the Paleolithic period. It was also widely used for making jewellery during the Hallstatt period (between 1200 and 500 BC.).

- **Spalt** is a stone used by metalworkers to facilitate the melting of metals. In the vocabulary of painters and printmakers, however, the term refers to asphalt or bitumen, also known as « Judean bitumen » or « bitumen of Judea ».

- **Bitumen** occurs naturally as a residue from ancient petroleum deposits, the lighter components of which have gradually evaporated over time through a process comparable to natural distillation. Used since prehistoric times, bitumen has been employed for waterproofing, sealing fired clay bricks, toolmaking and caulking boats.

  In printmaking, it is used to prepare soft varnishes and, when reduced to

powder, to produce aquatints.

- **Pitch** :
  Pitch is mainly obtained by distilling raw pine resin, and is used in the production of certain soft varnishes. This sticky, viscous and flammable substance is made up of plant resins and tars. Its primary use is to ensure the waterproofing of various joints and assemblies. There are many varieties of pitch, depending on the preparation method and the species of tree from which the resin is extracted. Pitch has been known and used since ancient times.

  a) Resin pitch (archaic spelling: poix raisine) is obtained by emulsifying rosin — the residue from the distillation of turpentine — with water. When rosin is vigorously stirred with water instead of being drawn off from the still, it loses its transparency and becomes known as yellow resin or resin pitch.
  b) Shoemaker's pitch, also known as black pitch, is obtained by distilling the resin of certain conifers or birch, followed by the slow combustion of resinous debris. The product then separates into two parts: a liquid called pitch oil and a more solid black substance called black pitch.
  c) White pitch refers to rosin obtained by distilling turpentine resin.
  d) Burgundy pitch, also known as Vosges pitch, is obtained by distilling spruce resin
  e) Natural pitch is produced by distilling larch resin.

Painting

A medium is a substance that is added to paint to give it specific properties.

- For **water-based paints** such as gouache or watercolour, gum arabic is used as the medium, to which honey may be added. Gum arabic has been used since prehistoric times, particularly for cave paintings.

- For **oil painting**, a mixture of oil (such as poppy seed or linseed oil) and pigments is used to form a coloured paste. Resins are generally used to prepare the medium, which acts as a binder for this paste. Egg white may also be used. The medium can be used to adjust the properties of the pictorial paste, including its drying time, transparency and surface

appearance (matte or glossy). It also facilitates the creation of impasto or glaze effects. Different types of medium therefore exist, depending on the desired painting effects (impasto, glazing, etc.).

Media based on beeswax have been used since Antiquity. Media made from resin or egg white appeared during the Renaissance. Oleoresinous media are composed of a natural resin (such as amber, mastic, copal, etc.), a generally heat-treated oil, and a solvent, such as turpentine.

Copal is a semi-fossilised resin that is similar to amber, but is generally clearer and more recent. Unlike amber, it is usually soluble in alcohol. Copal is used to prepare media and varnishes for oil painting.

Varnish should be applied to the painting once the oil paint is completely dry — after around six months to a year. Its purpose is to protect the pictorial layer and give the work a matte or glossy finish.

- The varnish must be transparent and composed of: :
  1a) either a soft natural resin, such as mastic, which produces a « l*ean varnish* » :
  1b) or a hard natural resin, such as **amber** or **copal**, which produces a « *hard varnish* » ;
- 2) a solvent to dilute and modify the consistency of the varnish, usually **turpentine** or **ethanol** obtained by distillation ;
- 3) Optionally, it may contain a matting agent, such as **beeswax**, to allow a matte finish.

References

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Notes