

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

Washington

ETCHINGS BY REMBRANDT

One or two conventionally executed etchings at the beginning of his career were sufficient to convince Rembrandt that the medium of etching was one over which he had instinctive control. Whereas some artists found the slow procedure, with its lack of direct control on the result, time consuming and inhibiting to their thoughts, to Rembrandt the actual processes acted as a stimulant. He immediately felt at ease with the etching needle between his fingers, and quickly learnt to wield it with the same freedom and assurance as he handled the brush, pen and chalk. And up to his last years when all his energies were concentrated on painting, he continued to devote as much time and thought to printmaking as he did to painting or drawing. The present exhibition, with exception of the generous loan of four original copper plates by Rembrandt from the estate of Robert Lee Humber, Greenville, N. C., is selected from the Gallery's own holdings, and attempts to demonstrate how the artist worked, and to show the differences in quality and appearance between the various states and impressions of the same subject.

No other printmaker has shown such a pragmatic response towards the medium, and at the same time has been so generous in allowing us to follow his thoughts as he worked towards an ideal end. Throughout his career Rembrandt was in the habit of taking trial impressions during the different stages, or states as they are known, as he developed a particular plate. Whereas with other artists we had to rely on preparatory drawings for an insight into the artist's mind, now we are frequently in a position to watch him actually at work.

As far as we know from the plates which still exist, nearly all of which belong to the estate of Robert Lee Humber, Rembrandt used copper exclusively for etching. Given their thickness, which is about the same as those used by artists today, it is remarkable how often he thought nothing of cutting them down, sometimes only removing a small piece, on other occasions dividing the plate up and developing each section individually. He also never hesitated to scrape down and burnish an unsatisfactory area of a plate, which then had to be hammered out from the back, all of which required considerable time and manual effort.

Before the artist took up his etching needle, he had to lay a ground on the plate, which would protect it from the acid. He then drew on the grounded plate, uncovering the copper where lines were required. The plate was immersed in acid, which would only eat into the copper where the ground had been removed. Strength and type of acid and also length of biting could be varied according to the kind and depth of line desired. The etcher was not limited to one immersion of the plate in the acid, but could continue to bite either the whole or part of the plate a number of times. This allowed him to get a wide variety of tones as well as put in additional work.

Rembrandt employed this method of developing his plates up to the end of the 1630s, when he started to evolve a new, simpler system. By executing the initial lay-in of his composition in etching, and then carrying out all further necessary work in drypoint or engraving, Rembrandt was able to have more direct control on the result. In both the processes of drypoint and engraving, the artist draws directly into the copper plate, thereby avoiding the necessity of laying a ground on the plate, as well as biting it in acid. Though engraving only played a subsidiary role in Rembrandt's work, his use of drypoint represented an important new technical feature. Employed in a small way as a method of retouching plates from almost the beginning of his career, drypoint later often became an essential part of the finished work, and on a number of occasions was used by itself.

The line produced by the drypoint needle is more angular and jagged than the etched line, reflecting the manual effort required to incise the line into the plate. Moreover, a ridge of copper, known as burr, is thrown up by the needle as it moves through the copper, and this can either be removed or can be used to provide an accent of tone. The qualities obtained from burr colored many of his later prints, and gave him an additional means of increasing the range of tone. The only disadvantage of this process was the limited life of the burr, which quickly wore away, as can be observed from comparisons made in the exhibition.

A new method of increasing the tonal range of his prints made its appearance in the later 1640s; by leaving an area of ink on the surface of the plate, Rembrandt was able to get unusual effects peculiar to each impression in the manner of a monotype. In earlier years Rembrandt had confined himself to printing on white paper, but about the same time as he started to use surface tone, he enlarged his range of papers on which he printed. Apart from white paper, he took to employing Japanese paper, which was imported into Holland from the Dutch East Indies and was available in different shades and thicknesses. Rather less often he employed both vellum, and a heavy gray paper with small flecks in it, made in Holland and known as oatmeal paper. (Examples of all of these will be found in the exhibition.) Rembrandt took great care to match the paper he printed on with the effects he sought from his plate. Sometimes he used as many different papers as possible for a particular subject, whereas on other occasions he printed entirely on one kind of paper. In a few cases he reserved different papers for different stages of his work on the plate. Each work of his maturity has an independence of its own, posing its own problems and requiring its own solution.