



*Self-Portrait in a Cap, Open Mouthed*, 1630  
Rembrandt van Rijn (Dutch, 1606–1669)  
Etching  
2-1/16 x 1-13/16 in. (5.2 x 4.6 cm)

Rembrandt van Rijn was born in Leiden in 1606, during the “Golden Age” of the Dutch Republic, a period marked by tremendous wealth and religious tolerance. This atmosphere of tolerance, and the peace and open business it encouraged, drew a wave of immigration and trade that enriched the Dutch and led to a flourishing of the arts. In part because the Dutch Republic was ruled by appointed representatives rather than kings, most art was either commissioned or purchased by middle class patrons who favored subjects like landscapes, scenes from ordinary life, and portraits rather than the large scale historical and religious paintings commissioned by the church or monarchy in neighboring countries. Rembrandt excelled in a variety of these genres over the course of his career, but his self-portraits stand out both for their exceptional quality and quantity.

Rembrandt began using himself as a model when he was still a student, studying his own expressions in order to improve his ability to capture emotion in his art. As a young artist, his face often appeared in his history paintings and general portraits, called *tronies*, which featured dramatic expressions and outlandish costumes. As a result, his likeness was well known from early on, and he continued to use himself as a model throughout his career. While portraiture was very popular at the time and many artists made self-portraits, few of Rembrandt’s contemporaries painted their own portraits more than several times. Even [Peter Paul Rubens](#), whose fame surpassed Rembrandt’s, made just seven self-portraits, three of which included his family members. In contrast, Rembrandt is estimated to have painted 80-100 self-portraits in the course of his career. There is no doubt these self-portraits, which carefully molded the public’s image of Rembrandt, contributed to his enduring fame.

In addition to his paintings, Rembrandt was also known for his innovative prints, in which he pioneered new techniques to add painterly details and subtle tonal transitions. Because each printing plate could produce multiple copies of the same image; from one plate, Rembrandt could create and sell many prints to promote his work to a wider audience while also experimenting with variations in composition and lighting as well as new techniques. This willingness to try new things and remain true to his own artistic sensibilities helped Rembrandt stand out from his peers and achieve a revered place in the History of Art.

*The Angel Appearing to the Shepherds*, 1634  
Rembrandt van Rijn (Dutch, 1606–1669)  
Etching  
24 x 19 in. (63.2 x 50.5 cm)

### Rembrandt: Innovative Printmaker

In the 17th century prints were ubiquitous, and many printmakers achieved fame. Over the course of his career, Rembrandt van Rijn made about 350 **etchings**. He was one of the most innovative printmakers of the 17th century, pioneering new **drypoint** and tonal techniques which allowed for painterly effects like softness of line and subtle gradients of shading.

### Key Concepts

This print is a masterpiece of Rembrandt's early style of the 1630s. It is larger than his other prints from this period and is among the most **Baroque** of his prints, using **chiaroscuro**, a strong contrast of dark and light, to create a sense of high drama.



The **composition** features a dramatic diagonal extending from a burst of heavenly light at the top left of the print to the illuminated shepherds in the lower right. Within the burst of light, the archangel Gabriel stands on a bank of clouds, surrounded by cherubs and a dove representing the holy spirit, as he raises his arm to announce the birth of Jesus and instruct the already frightened shepherds to “Be not afraid.”

The scene takes place at night, and the shepherds appear dwarfed by a vast, dark landscape. Their dramatic gestures (one shepherd flees while the other falls backward) together with the eerie spotlight shining upon them captures the awe and fear inspired by the sudden appearance of the supernatural.

### A Closer Look at Rembrandt's *The Angel Appearing to the Shepherds*

- Rembrandt uses extensive **cross-hatching** to create darkness in the print. During this period, he also investigated ways to create tone with **corrosion** rather than lines in order to create a softer gray tone. Whereas most contemporary prints resembled drawings, this tonal variation and lack of crisp outlines gives the print a painting-like quality.
- This scene comes from gospel of St Luke and had been illustrated for centuries, but it became even more popular in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The scene of shepherds receiving this announcement at night allowed Dutch printmakers to combine the familiar sight of herdsmen and flocks with dramatic nocturnal effects which had become very popular.
- The print adheres faithfully to the text but it departs from artistic convention of placing the viewer on the shepherds' level, on the ground. Instead, Rembrandt raises the viewpoint so that the viewer looks down on the shepherds, somewhere between the divine and the everyday.
- In this collision of heaven and earth, even the trees appear agitated. Yet somehow the distant landscape across the river remains peaceful, undisturbed by the dramatic events unfolding in the foreground.

## Discussion Questions

- How does the overall darkness of the print serve its message? How does it direct and focus your attention within the **composition**?
- Compare this depiction of an angel to another, earlier image in which an angel appears as a divine messenger, [\*The Annunciation\*](#). How do these two renditions of angels as messengers differ? What techniques do these artworks use to distinguish the divine and imbue the scene with a sense of the extraordinary?

## Activity

- Use **chiaroscuro** to add drama and direct the viewer's eye within a charcoal drawing of a dramatic scene from a narrative you've studied in school. What did you learn about the use of light and dark to create tension and focus?

## Vocabulary

- **Baroque**: a dramatic and exuberant style of art prevalent in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.
- **Chiaroscuro** (pronounced *kee-ar-oh-skoo-ro*): the use of boldly contrasting darks and lights.
- **Composition**: the overall arrangement of the different parts and elements of an artwork.
- **Corrosion**: the deterioration or wearing away of a metal as a result of chemical reactions.
- **Cross-hatching**: shading an area with intersecting sets of parallel lines.
- **Drypoint**: a printmaking technique in which a sharp stylus or needle is used to scratch lines directly into the metal plate from which the image is printed. Metal scrapings on either side of the lines, called burr, hold a dense film of ink with prints as rich, velvety black shading. Drypoint lines are softer and less clean than etched or engraved lines.
- **Etching**: a printmaking process in which a metal plate is coated with a waxy, acid-resistant material. The artist draws through this ground with an etching needle to expose the metal. The plate is then dipped in acid, which "bites" into the exposed metal leaving behind lines in the plate. By controlling the amount of time the acid stays on the plate, the artist can make shallow, fine lines or deep, heavy ones. After the coating is removed, the plate is inked then put through a high-pressure printing press together with a sheet of paper to make the print.

*Self-Portrait*, c. 1636–38  
Rembrandt van Rijn (Dutch, 1606–1669)  
Oil on panel  
24 x 19 in. (63.2 x 50.5 cm)



## Rembrandt: The Dutch Master

Rembrandt was the premier portraitist in Amsterdam during the 1630s and 1640s, and he also created a variety of **self-portraits**. His patrons appreciated his ability to capture their likeness as well as their character.

### Key Concepts

Rembrandt made many **self-portraits** throughout his life as a means of personal reflection and self-promotion. **Self-portraits** also allowed him to meet the demand for his work among avid collectors throughout Europe.

In this **self-portrait**, done at the peak of his personal and professional success, Rembrandt wears the beret that became associated with the artistic milieu as a result of his self-portraits. As the only Dutch artist who signed his work with just his first name, he emulated the Italian masters Raphael and Titian.

In addition to being a brilliant technician, Rembrandt distinguished himself from his contemporaries by developing a “rough” style of painting using **impasto**, in which areas of the surface are built up in layers, creating a raised surface and rough texture.

### A Closer Look at Rembrandt’s *Self-Portrait*

- The gold chain around his neck, a symbol of prestige awarded to a distinguished artist by a noble patron, which can be seen in Titian’s [Self-Portrait](#), elevates Rembrandt by association to the status of a fine artist.
- The combination of this chain and his elegant clothing lends Rembrandt stature at a time when artists were often viewed as simple craftsmen rather than members of the creative elite.
- Rembrandt took care to eliminate distractions by spotlighting his face against a dark background. However, he shrouded part of his face in shadow, perhaps to maintain an aura of mystery.

### Discussion Questions

- How would you describe Rembrandt’s clothing in this portrait? Does this look like the kind of attire you would wear when painting? Do you see anything that identifies him with the act of painting?
- How would you describe the setting of the painting? Together with the lighting, how does it affect the impression Rembrandt makes on the viewer?

## Activity

- Look at **self-portraits** by other artists in the Museum such as [Maurice-Quentin de La Tour](#) and [Marie-Geneviève Bouliar](#). How do they differ from Rembrandt's self-portrait? What do you think they are saying about themselves, and how does that differ from Rembrandt's message? Re-draw either Rembrandt's self-portrait or de La Tour or Bouliar's self-portrait in the style of one of the other portraits. How does this change in style affect your perception of that artist?

## Vocabulary

- **Impasto:** paint that is thickly applied to a painting's surface so that it stands out from the canvas or panel and seems almost like a relief.
- **Self-portrait:** a representation of an artist painted, drawn or sculpted by that artist.

*Self-Portrait at the Age of 34*, 1640  
Rembrandt van Rijn (Dutch, 1606–1669)  
Oil on canvas  
102 x 80 cm



## Rembrandt's Renaissance Influence

Although Rembrandt never traveled outside of Holland, by living in Amsterdam, a center of international trade, Rembrandt was able to see art from all over the world and by all the great masters. In 1638, Rembrandt attended the auction of the collection of Lucas van Uffelen, a wealthy Dutch merchant. It was one of the best attended auctions in the first half of the 17th century, attracting locals and foreigners and drawing exceptionally high prices. Raphael's [\*Portrait of Baldassare Castiglione\*](#) of 1514-15 and now in the Louvre was included in the sale and made a strong impression on Rembrandt.

## Key Concepts

In 1640, at the age of 34, he painted a self-portrait, borrowing the pose and rich dress from the Raphael portrait he had seen at the auction. He had made a sketch of the Raphael portrait, most likely while at the auction, and he had made an etching of himself the same year in a pose drawn from the portrait. This etching bears a strong resemblance to *Self-Portrait at the Age of 34* from the National Gallery, London.

Like most painters of his time, Rembrandt would have been familiar with the lives of legendary painters from the ancient world as well as the much-praised and highly valued Italian, Netherlandish, and German Renaissance masters like Raphael, Titian, and Albrecht Dürer.

Rembrandt's self-portrait is modeled on three other **iconic** Renaissance paintings: Raphael's *Portrait of Baldassare Castiglione*, Titian's [\*Portrait of Gerolamo \(?\) Barbarigo\*](#) of 1510, now in the National Gallery in London but in Amsterdam collection at the time, and Dürer's [\*Self Portrait\*](#) of 1498, now in the Museo del Prado in Madrid.

## A Closer Look at Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait*

- In the portrait, Rembrandt wears the costume of a 16<sup>th</sup>-century gentleman, modeled after those worn in the aforementioned portraits, with a full, striped sleeve, a fur collar, braided trimming, a smocked shirt and a standing collar.
- As in the Norton Simon's self-portrait, Rembrandt's outfit is complete with a gold chain, a reference to the chains given to Old Master artists like Titian as a sign of prestige by their princely patrons, and his characteristic beret.
- This Renaissance-inspired self-portrait exudes confidence. Echoing the aristocratic bearing of Raphael's *Portrait of Baldassare Castiglione* and Titian's *Portrait of Gerolamo (?) Barbarigo*, he rests his forearm on a ledge and looks out at the viewer with calm assurance.

## Discussion Questions

- What do you think Rembrandt is trying to communicate about himself with this painting? What do you see in the portrait that makes you come to that conclusion?
- Can you remember seeing an image in a museum, in class, on a trip or online that had a strong impact on you like the impact Raphael's *Portrait of Baldassare Castiglione* had on Rembrandt? What was it, and what about the image, or the setting in which you saw it, caught your attention and made it memorable?

## Activity

- Find your favorite painting or photograph of an artist, musician, or other leader that you admire (For example, it could be a self-portrait, an album cover, an official portrait or a picture from social media). Take a few minutes to write down what you like about this image, and what it communicates about this public figure and how. Then create your own carefully-staged self-portrait (a photograph, a painting, a drawing or a collage) influenced by the image you chose. Think about how you can create a self-portrait that demonstrates those qualities that you admire in the public figure you chose. What elements can you include to reveal something about who you are or how you would like to be seen by others? Present your image to the class and explain the choices you made.

## Vocabulary

- **Iconic:** a widely recognized and well-established image.

*Portrait of a Boy*, 1665–1660  
Rembrandt van Rijn (Dutch, 1606–1669)  
Oil on canvas  
25-1/2 x 22 in. (64.8 x 55.9 cm)



## A Cryptic Portrait

By the late 1650s and early 1660s, Rembrandt was celebrated as one of the most famous artists in Europe, but artistic trends had veered away from his personal style and he became increasingly isolated from mainstream Dutch art. Despite this setback, Rembrandt continued to receive a number of important portrait commissions. This unfinished portrait of a boy gives unique insight into the artist's working methods at that stage of his career.

## Key Concepts

Collectors have long prized the unfinished paintings of masters as a means to gain insight into the mind and working process of the artist. In 77 AD, the Roman Historian, Pliny the Elder wrote, "It is a very unusual and memorable fact that the last works of artists and their unfinished paintings... are more admired than those which they finished, because in them are seen the preliminary drawings left visible and the artists' actual thoughts."

Rembrandt is believed to have begun his compositions with a brown **wash drawing** laying out the overall composition of the painting, followed by filling in areas of dark and light. Then he would add color and finish with the strongest **highlights** and other details. Here, he began with a rich dark **ground** and then laid down the composition with broad strokes before painting in the head and then the body.

Different areas of the painting have been left in various states of completion. While the body and costume are barely indicated with broad strokes, the sitter's head is more highly finished. The face, framed by a white collar, appears bathed in light and stands out from the dark background as if lit from within.

## A Closer Look at *Portrait of a Boy*

- This painting has long been treasured for its intimate rendering of childhood. Because of this perceived intimacy, for a long time this portrait was believed to be a portrait of Rembrandt's son, Titus. However, Titus would have been a teenager when this portrait was painted, and [portraits of Titus from the same period](#) show a much more mature young man.
- If you look closely, you can see some kind of animal perched on the boy's left shoulder. While we cannot securely identify this animal, an 18<sup>th</sup>-century biography of Rembrandt includes a story about an unfinished portrait of a young boy that may be related. According to this story, Rembrandt was painting a group portrait of a family when his beloved pet monkey died. Because he had no other canvas on which to paint the monkey, he included it in the family portrait he was working on, but the family objected and the painting was left unfinished. Study of the painting has revealed that the portrait was indeed cut down from a larger canvas, which may have included more figures.



- Rembrandt frequently painted his subjects, including himself, in historical costumes drawn from iconic Renaissance paintings and prints. Rather than a contemporary outfit, the boy wears a costume seemingly inspired by a [Holbein portrait](#) painted a century earlier. It is possible that Rembrandt could have seen and drawn the Holbein portrait in the 1640s in Amsterdam.

### Discussion Questions

- Compare this painting to Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait*. Aside from its state of completion, what differences do you notice in how Rembrandt approaches the two portraits? What circumstances could account for these differences? For example, the later date of the portrait, the age of the sitter, the fact that one is a portrait of himself, the fact that *Portrait of a Boy* was most likely commissioned, etc.
- Look at another example of an unfinished painting, in this case an oil sketch, [Meleager and Atalanta and the Hunt of the Calydonian Boar](#) by Peter Paul Rubens, next to a finished painting by the same artist, [David Slaying Goliath](#). How do they differ in style? Which do you find more compelling, the oil sketch or the finished painting? Why?

### Activity

- Write a short story about either the boy in this painting or the making of the painting. Who is this boy, and how did he feel about dressing up and getting his portrait painted? What is it that sits on his shoulder? Why do you think this painting was never finished? Who do you think commissioned it?

### Vocabulary

- **Ground:** the foundation of an oil painting, or the background surface upon which you paint.
- **Highlight:** an area of the lightest tone in a painting, drawing, photograph.
- **Wash drawing:** a wash is a term for a visual arts technique in which diluted ink or watercolor paint is used to create in a semi-transparent layer of color. Rembrandt used a wash to lay out his compositions before he began adding paint.