

The Influence of the Orient on Rembrandt

In our present attitude to art we are more interested in its form than in its objective contents. Therefore we may easily understand, that there existed artistic relations between the Irish miniatures and the Near Oriental art. Both showed strong ^{tendency towards abstraction} abstracting features. Although when contemplating the Dutch paintings of the 17th century, we tend to believe, that we can only discover objective relations between Orient and Occident, ^{for instance} as in the Netherlands we have to deal with a sound realism and an illusion of space, which we can hardly expect to become manifest in Oriental art. I may be permitted to speak here solely of Rembrandt, not of the many elements of influence, which already a long time before him, ~~had~~ flowed from India and China into Europe. ~~we~~ Neither ^{do we} want to discuss the role that Turkish costumes played in the drawings and paintings of the two Bellinis, of Giorgione and Dürer, of the Danube School or in those of Lastman, Rembrandt's teacher. The Calvinistic Netherlands preferred themes offered in the Old Testament. Therefore we find an abundance of Near Oriental motifs in Rembrandt's sketches and paintings as well as in his collections. In the early baroque period the tendency towards representations of motifs found in the Old Testament was accompanied by the wish to drape the figures accordingly, thus calling forth a bombastic amalgamation of many national costumes, which, on the one hand, Rembrandt could not fail to observe on the Jews and Turks of Amsterdam and which, on the other, he could easily copy from models. He veiled the thus nascent pompous splendour in his mysterious chiaroscuro, simultaneously creating a special atmosphere, which might be termed as ^{the} "Dutch exotism" of the 17th century.

We know that the young Rembrandt was a collector of far-reaching interests. Besides works of ancient Greek or Latin origin and those of the Italian Renaissance he eagerly accumulated exotic objects. As Andres Pels narrated in his verees: Rembrandt bought foreign weapons and curiosities wherever he could find them, at fairs or on bridges. The artist unfortunately lost all his treasures when he went bankrupt. On an auction list of Christian Porret's "Indiansche Raritey-

ten" are mentioned besides Persian and Chinese books from Rembrandt's possessions. In the "Blätter für alte und neue Kunst" ("Papers on old and new art") Swoboda in 1952 explored the special influence of Islamic art on Europe, but, strange to say, he omitted Rembrandt in his researches.

In this connection a book with Islamic-Indian miniatures, which Rembrandt once owned, is of far greater interest, because its influence reached deeper than the objective contents. Probably it is identical with "een boeck vol curieuse minijataur teeckeninge", which is mentioned in Rembrandt's inventory list of the bankrupt sale. In 1904 and in 1909 Friedrich Sarre already broached the subject in the "Jahrbuch der preussischen Kunstsammlungen" (Yearbook of the Prussian Art Collections), but without sufficiently exposing the eminent formal importance, this album held for Rembrandt. There still exist twenty drawings by Rembrandt's hand, which are copies from this Islamic book. They appear to have been made shortly before the auction of Rembrandt's collection, that is to say about 1656. But they had nothing to do with the study of exotic ~~exotica~~ costumes. The artist was solely interested in the foreign conception of composition, because in many cases he reproduced the picture as a whole. Naturally he did not copy in the way, esthetic scientists would have proceeded, but he transposed the extremely colourful miniatures into the chiaroscuro notes of his pencil, without softening the pure linear conception of these models. Neither did he ^{copy} ~~draw~~ the strict contours of their figures in the baroque manner. He seems here to have greatly enjoyed the feeling of recaptivating the linear element. These Asiatic models partly date from Rembrandt's time, because, among the represented personalities, we discover f.i. Shah Djehan (1628 -1659). Rembrandt did not begin to draw copies of these miniatures till he wanted to achieve the retrograde transformation of the three-dimensional quality of his chiaroscuro style into linear impressions. This artistic event recalls the interest, which, in the 19th century, Edouard Manet suddenly took in Japanese woodcuts, exactly at the very moment he wished to withdraw from Courbet's plastic naturalism. In this connection we may

also mention Picasso, who did not grasp fully grasp the importance of the negro plastic art for his work, till the formal problem of cubism entered his mind.

Probably the Islamitic-Indian copies by Rembrandt were a documentation although not a manifestation. Many of these drawings by Rembrandt were left by the English painter Jonathan Richardson, who lived from 1665 to 1745. In any case his inventory mentioned "a book of Indian drawings by Rembrandt, 25 in number". It appears that the book was cut up, because almost all of these drawings by Rembrandt later found their way to English painters of the 18th and the 19th centuries. We may surmise that Rembrandt got hold of this volume of Islamitic miniatures through Philip Angel, a Dutch painter friend, who for years acted as representative for the East India Company at Batavia and Ispahan and in 1652 was named court painter to the Persian Court. He praised Rembrandt's understanding of Oriental customs. The artist was also acquainted with Abraham Wilnerdoncx, director of the East India Company, who owned a rather voluminous collection of East Asiatic objects and was ~~presented~~ ^{finished} by Rembrandt.

For us here, who do not want to enter a pedantic discussion on historical details, it is important to ~~state~~ state the profound peace of mind and soul that ~~the~~ only the mature Rembrandt was able to obtain; the antibaroque tranquility and equanimity of his composition ~~was~~ not only obtained by the gradually growing influence of the works of the Italian Renaissance, as has been constantly pointed out, but also by the Asiatic strictness, evident in the conception of the form itself, in the clearly defined contours, in the serene relationship of the human figures represented, in the ~~relaxed~~ ^{serene} lines structure, which was never tempted by baroque or rhetorical pomp. Thus the formal impulse ~~of~~ of the Orient gained decisive influence upon the formation of Rembrandt's late style.