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Rembrandt's Reclining Nude Reconsidered

Kolfin, E.

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Shorter Notices

Rembrandt's *Reclining Nude* Reconsidered

Elmer Kolfin

'Un effet de sa bizarrerie ordinaire' was how Pierre Jean Mariette interpreted the darkness in Rembrandt's print commonly known as *Negress Lying Down* (Bartsch 205; fig. 36, inv. RP-P-OB 428). The title was first noted

I would like to thank Paul Kaplan and Erik Hinterding for their useful suggestions.

1. 'une femme nue que Rheimbrandt a mis entièrement dans l'ombre par un effet de sa bizarrerie ordinaire, et pour tirer quelque avantage de cet essay clair obscur', P. de Chenevières and A. de Montaiglon, *Abecedario de P.J., Mariette et autres notes inédites de cet amateur*, Paris, 1857–58, IV, p. 352. A. von Bartsch, *Catalogue raisonné de toutes les estampes qui forme l'oeuvre de Rembrandt et ceux de ces principaux imitateurs*, Vienna, 1797, no. 205. It is not certain if he in-

by Adam von Bartsch in 1797.¹ Ever since, there has been doubt as to the woman's racial identity, a matter that gained some urgency with the growing interest in blacks in art since the 1970s.² Mariette and others

vented the title; sometimes he passed on conventional knowledge about Rembrandt.

2. An overview of the most recent opinions in E. Hinterding, *Rembrandt Etchings from the Frits Lugt Collection*, Bussum, 2008, p. 375, note 3 and E. Kolfin, 'Rembrandt's Africans', in *The Image of the Black in Western Art vol III.1. From the Age of Discovery to the Age of Abolition: Artists of the Renaissance and Baroque*, edited by D. Bindman and H. L. Gates Jr., Cambridge, MA and London, 2010, p. 302, and p. 377 note 7.

before Bartsch saw a white woman in the shade.³ The new title was given in a period with much artistic interest in blacks. The abolitionist movement had just discovered the power of the printed image.⁴ One year before Bartsch's catalogue was published, William Blake's prints of slaves appeared in John Gabriel Stedman's soon-to-be famous *Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*.⁵ Blacks were also becoming popular subjects in painting.⁶ Quite possibly this interest inspired the new interpretation of the woman in Rembrandt's print as African.

In 1731, 1735 and 1755 the print was called *The Sleeping Woman*, *Sleeping Women* [sic] and *A Nude Sleeping Woman with Naked Buttocks*.⁷ In 1679 the plate, now at the British Museum, was identified as *Sleeping Nude Woman*.⁸ As a rule, descriptions in seventeenth-century probate inventories drew attention to what was regarded as the most characteristic feature of the image. When blacks were the single subject of an image, it would usually be described as 'a moor' or 'a black'. For example, in Rembrandt's own inventory of 1656, his painting of two Africans was listed as *Two Moors*

3. One year before Bartsch published his catalogue, the print was called *A Naked Woman Seen from Behind in Rembrandt's Dark Manner* in D. Daulby, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Works of Rembrandt, and of his Scholars, Bol, Livens, and Van Vliet, Compiled from the Original Etchings, and from the Catalogues of De Burgy, Gersaint, Helle & Glomy, Marcus & Yver*, Liverpool, 1796, p. 129, no. 197. Rembrandt's first catalogue called it *Une autre femme nue, aussi couchée sur un lit*, see E. F. Gersaint, *Catalogue raisonné de toutes les pièces qui forment l'œuvre de Rembrandt*, Paris, 1751, p. 160, no. 197.
4. E. Kolfin, 'Becoming Human: The Iconography of Black Slavery in French, British and Dutch Book Illustration, 1600–1800', in *From Renaissance Trophy to Abolitionist Emblem: The Slave in European Art Publications of the Warburg Institute*, edited by E. McGrath and J. M. Massing, London, 2012, pp. 161–90.
5. G. E. Bentley Jr., *Blake Books: Annotated Catalogues of William Blake's*

- Writings*, Oxford, 1977, p. 623.
6. H. Honour, *The Image of the Black in Western Art IV.1. From the American Revolution to World War I, Slaves and Liberators*, Cambridge, MA and London, 1989, pp. 27–119 and D. Bindman, *Ape to Apollo: Aesthetics and the Idea of Race in the 18th Century*, London, 2002.
7. Sale catalogue De Burgy, 1755, nos. 550–55 (different states and variations); sale catalogue Van Huls, 1735, no. 1008; inventory of Valerius Rover, 1731; all quoted in Hinterding, op. cit., p. 375, notes 1 and 2.
8. F. Laurentius, *Clement de Jonge (ca. 1624–1677): Kunstverkoper in de Gouden Eeuw*, Houten, 2010, p. 148, no. 743. Laurentius identifies two other descriptions as possible references to the print: 'Naakte Cleopatra' (*Nude Cleopatra*) and 'Rembrandt's concubine' (*Rembrandt's Concubine*), pp. 148–49, nos. 764 and 782.



36. Rembrandt, *Reclining Nude*, 1658, etching, drypoint and burin, second state, 81 x 158 mm (Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Rijksprentenkabinet).

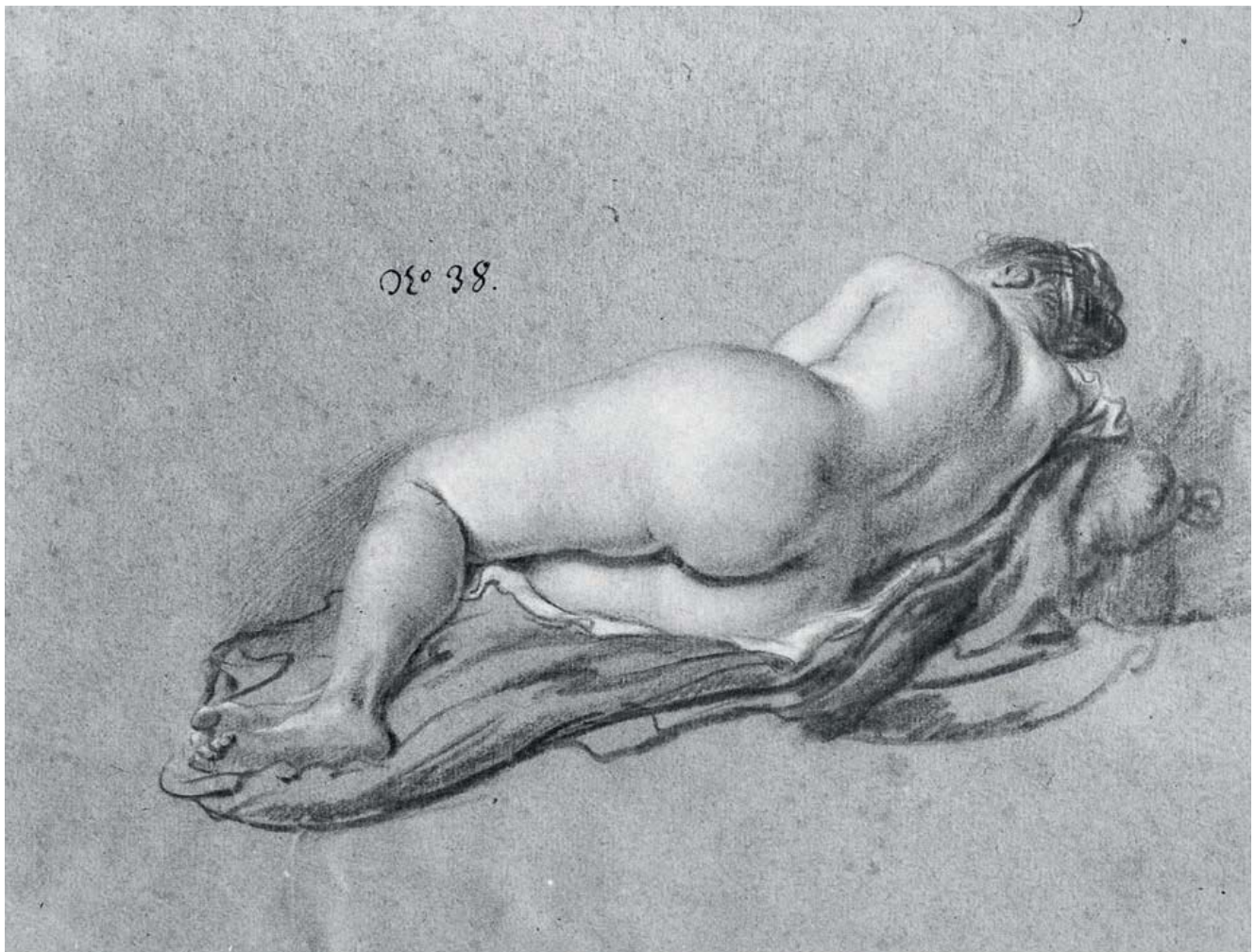
in a Picture by Rembrandt.⁹ Therefore it is significant that his *Reclining Woman* was not called *Black Woman Lying Down* but *Sleeping Nude Woman*. Evidently in 1679 the woman was not seen as black.

Reclining Nude is dated 1658 and it is useful to look at Rembrandt's other prints of the time. The print shows a woman lying on a mattress; the dark background suggests a confined space like the bed in *Woman with the Arrow*, of 1661, or *Antiope and Jupiter* from 1659 (Bartsch 202 and 203). If we add to this little series his *Woman at a Brook* (Bartsch 200) from 1658 it becomes clear that Rembrandt was experimenting with nude white women and shadow in narrowly confined spaces. *Woman at the Stove* and *Woman with the Hat*, both from 1658, show the same interest (Bartsch 197

and 199). In every print the artist situates the woman differently vis-à-vis the shadow and light. In *Woman at a Brook* she is placed in front of a dark background, her right side in a soft shadow. *Antiope and Jupiter* shows a more bold play of light and an extremely velvety shadow on legs, hips and belly. In *Woman with the Arrow* she is on the verge of light and shade; half shadows define her back while a strong light throws the side of her body into sharp silhouette. Chronologically, *Reclining Nude* falls between *Woman at a Brook* and *Jupiter and Antiope*, between the refined print and the more daring experiment. In this context it does not seem illogical to see the woman as a white model in a situation that seems straightforward, but that is extremely difficult to depict because the subject is fully in the

9. W. L. Strauss and M. van der Meulen, *The Rembrandt Documents*,

New York, 1979, p. 365.



37. Anonymous artist, *Reclining Nude Seen from Behind*, 1658, black and white chalk on blue paper, 234 x 315 mm (formerly Amsterdam, Paul Brandt).

shadow. Had she been a black model, Rembrandt would have created a completely new situation.

Interestingly, there exists an anonymous drawing depicting a *Reclining Nude Seen from Behind* that has not been related to Rembrandt's *Reclining Nude*, but seems to be connected to it (fig. 37). It is alternatively attributed to Rembrandt's pupils Ferdinand Bol and Govert Flinck. Jacob Backer was also recently suggested.¹⁰ The woman in the drawing is posed slightly more diagonally, she is more curvaceous, we see her ear and hair, but not her right foot. She is in full light, which falls in from the left. *Reclining Nude Seen from Behind* is generally seen as the result of a session of life drawing on 27 July 1658 that included both Bol and Flinck, in the same year that Rembrandt dated his *Reclining Nude* print.¹¹ If he was indeed present, the white girl in fig. 37 might actually be the same model as in the print. A situation comes to mind like the one depicted in Constantijn Daniel van Renesse's drawing *Rembrandt and his Pupils Drawing from a Nude Model* of c. 1650 (fig. 38), except that the 1658 session would have involved Rembrandt and ex-pupils who by then had gone their own way and whose style differed from that of the master. Possibly the relationship between Rembrandt's *Reclining Nude* and the anonymous *Reclining Nude Seen from Behind* is comparable to that between the etching of *Male Nudes, Seated and Standing – the Walking Trainer* (Bartsch 194) and drawings by Carel Fabritius, Samuel van Hoogstraten and an unknown pupil of circa 1646.¹² A similar example dates from 1661, with Rembrandt creating his *Woman with the Arrow* (Bartsch 202) and Johannes Raven making a drawing of a seated female nude.¹³ In all cases the pupils were working on paper, while Rembrandt was drawing directly on a copperplate; he introduced new features at a later stage: the background with the walking trainer in Bartsch 194, the face of Cupid in Bartsch 202 and the strong shadow on the woman's body in Bartsch 205.

Only one impression of the first state of Rembrandt's *Reclining Nude* exists. It was poorly inked and

has the appearance of a proof, even though it was printed on Japanese paper.¹⁴ If Rembrandt indeed worked on the plate in front of a live model this print may be the result of that session. The image is not very appealing, for it lacks 'force', a seventeenth-century term that denoted a strong relief resulting from a play of light and shadow and situating the figure firmly in space. Her back is still too flat, the anatomy of the right hip is awkward and she is lying rather squarely in front of the shadow rather than being enveloped by it. This is not what Rembrandt would have been after.

Rembrandt finally achieved the desired effect of a body lying in shadow through etching and drypoint, with a dense pattern of delicate hatching and cross-hatching. Dark areas were given extra 'force' with the burin. In the final blend, the different techniques are almost impossible to distinguish. This in itself already signals workmanship of the highest quality. But the true magic comes with the inking, wiping and printing of the plate.¹⁵ Rembrandt did not wipe the plate clean overall, but left thin films of ink in places that show up in the final print as subtle tonal fields of light grey, almost as a translucent wash applied with the brush. He also used varying types of paper and different effects. As a result, each print is unique. Very dark copies exist, but also relatively light ones.

Caps of the kind the woman is wearing were bright white, as they appear in other etchings by Rembrandt from this time, such as the *Sitting Nude Beside a Chair with a Hat*, of 1658 (Bartsch 199). In *Reclining Nude* the cap is not rendered white, so the head must be in the shadow. The tonality of the cap is comparable to that of the woman's side. If the cap is white, it seems reasonable to assume the body is white and also in the shadow. The wider spaced cross-hatching makes the cap slightly lighter in places, suggesting its texture and intense whiteness.

Also revealing is the woman's face, of which we see a small part at the temple. In most copies this spot was not inked, so that it would print white. Its function is to

10. W. Sumowski, *Drawings of the Rembrandt School*, New York, 1979, I, p. 262, admits the style is more reminiscent of Flinck, but attributes it to Bol because of a similar figure in Bol's painting *Cimon and Ephigenia*, formerly in Bremen, Kunsthalle (lost in World War II). The attribution to Backer in P. van den Brink, *Jacob Backer (1608/09–1651)*, Zwolle, 2008, p. 79.

11. See Sumowski, *ibid.*, p. 262, A. Bredius, *Künstler-Inventare: Urkunden zur Geschichte der holländischen Kunst des XVIIen, XVIIen und XVIIIen Jahrhunderts*, Den Haag, 1915–22, IV, p. 1255 and E. J. Sluijter, *Rembrandt and the Female Nude*, Amsterdam, 2006, p. 323.

12. H. Bevers et al., *Telling the Difference: Drawings by Rembrandt and his*

Pupils, Los Angeles, 2009, pp. 13–17.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 242–25.

14. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, see C. White, *Rembrandt as an Etcher: A Study of the Artist at Work*, New Haven and London, 1999, pp. 204–06; J. Lloyd Williams, *Rembrandt's Women*, Edinburgh and London, 2001, p. 229 and Hinterding, *op. cit.* pp. 374–75.

15. C.H. Middleton, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Etched Work of Rembrandt van Rhyne*, London, 1878, p. 281: 'The beauty of an impression of this print depends more on the successful printing than on the State in which it appears'. He calls the print 'A Negress lying on a Couch'.



38. Constantijn Daniël van Renesse, *Rembrandt and his Pupils Drawing from a Nude Model*, c. 1650, black chalk, brush and brown wash heightened with white, 180 x 266 mm (Darmstadt, Hessisches Landesmuseum).

separate the dark hair or the shadow in the neck from the slightly hunched shoulder and the background. This entire part would be blurred if Rembrandt had made this little spot dark too, which he would have had to do if he intended the woman to be black.

Rembrandt made seven prints with black people, all dating between 1630 and 1652.¹⁶ In most of these he did not indicate the darkness of the skin, but rather relied on the physiognomy to suggest the figures' African identity. Only the soldier in *Ecce Homo* from 1636 and the servant in the *Beheading of John the Baptist* from 1640 have a light hatching that suggests a brown tone (Bartsch 77 and 92). Rembrandt stubbornly ad-

hered to the convention of depicting telling physical features to indicate African heritage that went back to Albrecht Dürer, Lucas van Leyden and Hendrick Goltzius. His contemporaries, like Lucas Vorsterman and Wenceslaus Hollar, were at the same time looking for ways to depict dark skin convincingly in print, with careful, often dense patterns of hatching and cross-hatching.¹⁷ In this context a reclining black woman would certainly be a late, unexpected and unique response. A reclining white nude in the semi-dark, however, fits neatly with Rembrandt's experiments with the effect of shadow in the 1650s that resulted in so many extraordinary prints.

16. *Bust of a Black Woman*, c. 1630 (Bartsch 357); *Ecce Homo*, 1636 (Bartsch 77); *The Decapitation of St John the Baptist*, 1640 (Bartsch 92); *The Baptism of the Eunuch*, 1641 (Bartsch 98); *The Large Lion Hunt*,

1641 (Bartsch 114); *The Preaching of Christ*, c. 1639–49 (Bartsch 74) and *Christ among the Doctors*, 1652 (Bartsch 65).

17. Kolfin, 2010, op. cit., pp. 299–302.