Rembrandt's Reclining Nude Reconsidered

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Contents

Alessandro Gandini: Uncovering the Identity of a Chiaroscuro Woodcutter
JAN JOHNSON
The Print Drawer of the Coaci Inkstand
JANE IMMLER SATKOWSKI
RACHEL SAUNDERS

Shorter Notices

Rembrandt’s Reclining Nude Reconsidered
ELMER KOLFIN
Whatever is Coveted will be Forged – Forgers Set Their Sights on Contemporary Prints
HUBERTUS BUTIN

Notes

Catalogue and Book Reviews

Antonio Lafreri’s Religious Prints
ECKHARD LEUSCHNER
The Business of Prints in Amsterdam’s Golden Age
JACO RUTGERS
Pierre Lepautre (1652–1716)
PETER FUHRING
The Efflorescence of French and English Caricature
JAMES CUNO
The Strobridge Company’s Circus Posters
NANCY FINLAY
Peter Blake: One Man Show
BEN THOMAS
Markus Raetz
LAUREN LAZ
Print/Out: 20 Years in Print
RONI FEINSTEIN
Paula Rego
SUE HUBBARD
NO. TITLE PUBLICATION DATE TECHNIQUE
115 Jinsei no mon 1 March 1978 Relief karen print
116 Airan no koi 8 November 1978 Gold foil stencil
117 Rui to Kanna 8 October 1978 Pufboard printing
118 Sode no shita 20 January 1979 Self-carved woodblock karen print
119 Erinahime to chô 1 March 1979 Arumina Porcelain (photolithography on ceramic)
120 Hanatsu to tanuki 1 April 1979 Three-colour relief printing
121 Shafu Mangoro 15 May 1979 Two-colour relief printing
122 Chinchikurin no mikoto 23 June 1979 Two-colour relief printing
123 Bangasa kidan 15 August 1979 Pufboard printing
124 Kakei to teko 20 September 1979 Two-colour relief printing
125 Shin no mabô 20 October 1979 Self-carved woodblock karen print
126 Berabô monogatari 25 June 1980 Heat embossing
127 Kato Kiyomasa 10 October 1980 Three-colour relief printing
128 Kudara no senmin 1 March 1981 Monochrome relief print
129 Rejo nesai 12 December 1980 Self-carved woodblock karen print
130 Tsuki kara kita ko 30 March 1981 Intaglio gold line printing
131 Senju Kannon 5 May 1981 Unspecified (letterpress)
132 Tôkirisuemon no tsuna 3 November 1981 Self-carved woodblock karen print
133 Fûjin to raizin 10 March 1982 Bullrush-leaf paper, relief print
134 Kaguyahime gojitsudan 10 October 1982 Three-colour relief printing
135 Tsuribane ibun 25 June 1982 Colour cloud paper, relief printing
136 Ionagêki 15 August 1982 All stamping
137 ABC Towa 3 November 1982 Self-carved woodblock karen print
138 Toritsukai no otome 11 February 1983 Laser cut
139 Tenjiku to tori 20 April 1983 Indian paper, two-colour relief printing

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 by Adam van Bartsch in 1797. 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. Mariette and others

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before Bartsch saw a white woman in the shade. 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. 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.* Blacks were also becoming popular subjects in painting. 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.* In 1679 the plate, now at the British Museum, was identified as *Sleeping Nude Woman.* 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*...
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


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. 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

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. 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. In this context a reclining black woman
would certainly be a late, unexpected and unique re-
sponse. A reclining white nude in the semi-dark, how-
ever, 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).

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).