REMBRANDT IN ITALY

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"Youth is too busy to waste time in travel when Italian masterpieces abound at home, while in Italy they are scattered and hard to get at." This scrap of Rembrandt’s conversation, almost the only one preserved, does not mean that he was too lofty a genius to bother with the art of other men, but simply that he hated the delays of travel, which is not strange, since he allowed nothing—not court summons nor bankruptcy nor family deaths—to get between him and his mania for work. Far from despising Italian or any other art, he was like any assured craftsman in picking up ideas wherever he found them, and making them his own. This was true even in his brash twenties, when, as one of the Fauves of Leiden, he made the above remark about Italian art. At that time he was pursuing a vigorous, if crude, study of expression by sketching himself as he mugged and made mouths at the looking glass. Later in life, when he had taught himself to express emotions with deeper conviction and less emphasis than any other painter, he drew more and more on the Italians’ millenial experience of form. He may have become increasingly aware that his compatriots had carved and painted images of men for less than five centuries, while the Italians had been continuously subtle at these arts for well over two thousand years.

Rembrandt was right in saying that Italian art could be studied at home, for the commerce in works of art naturally flourished in Amsterdam, which was then the busiest money market in the world. In April of his thirty-second year a picture came up at auction there which seems to have marked a kind of turning point in his career. This was Raphael’s portrait of Baldassare Castiglione, the author of The Courtier, which now hangs, or used to hang, in the Louvre. Rembrandt sketched the painting, noted the price of 3,500 guilders, carefully labeled the sketch “Conte batasar de kastylyone van raefael,” and filed it away in the vast classified collection of his own drawings which was a kind of graphic diary for reference. He then concocted a velvet “Rembrandt hat” like the one in Raphael’s painting, struck a pose like Castiglione’s, and etched his own portrait. The next year he painted himself in a similar getup and attitude. More important still, Raphael’s sober harmony of browns and grays helped Rembrandt to discard
local color the better to fuse figures into the air of their surroundings. How lucky it is that he happened on the only—or almost the only—painting of Raphael's that is not a colored drawing!

Rembrandt already knew Raphael's art, for the year before the auction, and probably long before that, he had bought prints after Raphael's design. Even when he was bankrupt he acquired a Marcantonio engraving after Raphael by swapping the most valuable of his own prints, a first state on Japan vellum of his Hundred Guilder Christ Healing the Sick. Rembrandt's lifelong passion for collecting, which absorbed his wife's fortune as well as his own large earnings, amassed him a houseful of prints, drawings, and paintings whose inventory, drawn up by the bankruptcy court (Desolate Boedelkamer), possibly with Rembrandt's help, is the despair of any collector today. The walls of every room except the kitchen, studios, and garret were a mosaic of paintings, while his prints and drawings, which
included all his own work, were laid down in a small library of about seventy scrapbooks. The prints by other artists took up almost thirty-five books alone, of which more than half were filled with Italian work. A book apiece was devoted to each of the chief later artists, such as Titian (a “very large” book), Michelangelo, Barocci, Vanni, Tempesta (three books), and the Bolognese School. In the whole inventory the only prints mentioned with adjectives of praise are those by older Italians. There was “the precious book” of Mantegna and there were four books of prints after Raphael, of which one contained “very precious prints” and another “very fine impressions.” These adjectives were surely no understatement, for Rembrandt, being himself one of the most fastidious of copperplate printers, must have selected only the choicest impressions from Amsterdam’s full and flowing print market. Today his collection would make the glory of a great museum and, as a matter of fact, does, since dozens of the prints
and drawings he owned must be in every sizable collection in the world, including our own. But which are they? Very occasionally he copied a drawing and so identified it, possibly, as having been owned by him, but he never seems to have put any mark of ownership on any prints or drawings that he bought, because he was not collecting a cabinet to display his taste and power but tools to use.

It was no more reprehensible for Rembrandt to use themes from other men’s art than it was for the Greek tragedians to ring changes on the old myths. It is interesting to watch Rembrandt’s growth of skill in assimilating his sources. When, as a young man of twenty-nine, he etched Christ Driving the Money Changers from the Temple, he took his figure of Christ without much alteration from a Dürer woodcut and set near it a figure that recurs time and again in Tintoretto, shown from the back as it springs diagonally upward. The print is confused. Years later, when he was entering his great decade of the 1650’s, he etched one of his masterpieces, the Christ Preaching, known as the Petite Tombe. The oval grouping of the figures, which leads the eye inevitably around from listener to listener, is an arrangement that is unique in Rembrandt’s work and seems to be derived from the Death of Ananias, which Raphael designed to be woven in one of the Sistine Chapel tapestries. Rembrandt knew the tapestry cartoon through Ugo da Carpi’s woodcut. Rembrandt’s trained and concentrated imagination was searching for dramatic monumentality and found it in that tradition of simple and formal grandeur that reappeared at the beginnings of four Italian centuries in Giotto, Masaccio, Raphael, and Caravaggio. It is hard to think of any work of art produced north of the Alps which has more of the essence of the Italian Renaissance than the Petite Tombe.

The striking similarity between Rembrandt’s etching of Jan Lutma the goldsmith and the portrait that Raphael painted of Pope Julius II, which Rembrandt may have known through a copy now lost, has been noticed by a keen observer who has also pointed out that Rembrandt could hardly have hit on the compact piling up of bodies in his etched and painted Sacrifice of Abraham if he had not known some print of mannerist sculpture such as Andreani’s woodcuts of Giovanni Bologna’s Rape of the Sabines.

So who shall say that Rembrandt did not go to Italy? Those who travel by books and pictures often know more about the lands they visit in imagination than do those who go by Cook’s tour, and Rembrandt absorbed more from Italian art than did all the hundreds of Hollanders who spent their lives painting in the Campagna and the Forum.