Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer

by THEODORE ROUSSEAU Curator of European Paintings

Ever since Rembrandt’s painting of Aristotle came to the Museum, unprecedented crowds have flocked to see it. Throngs of spectators constantly press up to the protective enclosure before it; on weekends there have been long lines stretching out onto Fifth Avenue, waiting for a chance to admire it.

Much of this extraordinary interest can be ascribed to the publicity—almost amounting to notoriety—surrounding the acquisition of this work: many people are simply curious to see the picture that cost so much. But the reaction of visitors to the painting itself goes far beyond this. The hushed, almost reverent attitude with which they gaze at it indicates a profound and personal response to qualities in the work that satisfy man’s inward craving for beauty.

What is there in the painting which makes us feel this way about it? The answer comes, I think, almost subconsciously, when we first look at it. Whether or not we know what the picture represents, its mood is communicated to us with extraordinary and compelling force. The solemn, manly figure, his eyes gazing into space, his strong hand resting gently, almost tenderly on the head of the sculptured bust, seems completely absorbed in his thoughts. By some almost magical power in the picture, our thoughts are drawn with his, through the dark, brooding eyes which are the focal point of the composition, into a distant world of dreams and melancholy.

Except for his strange and rather fantastic costume, unlike anything else in Rembrandt’s work, there is nothing really striking or unusual about this man. The artist seems to have used the same model on several occasions, and the face seems almost to have been chosen for its universal rather than its individual qualities. His features are composed; his gesture quite simple and without affectation. One has only to think of pictures with similar themes painted in Rembrandt’s time to realize that this one is utterly unmannered. This work, in fact, is timeless.

The mood of the picture is due in great part to the treatment of light. The lower half of the face is the only brightly illuminated area; the rest is either bathed in a glowing half-light or veiled in deepest shadow. There are no sharp, dramatic contrasts; all the transitions are gentle, in keeping with the quiet, restrained atmosphere.

ON THE COVER: Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer, by Rembrandt Harmensz. van Ryn (1606-1669), Dutch. Signed and dated 1653. Oil on canvas, 56 ½ x 53 ¾ inches

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Within the half-shadows, there is a play of reflected lights, giving an undercurrent of throbbing life to these areas and emphasizing the stillness of the face.

This play of light, leading our eyes gently from one part of the painting to another, inevitably carries our attention to the face, which stands out isolated against the deep shadows of the curtain. It is in the face that we find the key to the power with which the picture stirs our emotions. It lies, I believe, in the contrast of the clearly lighted, forcefully modeled nose and mouth and cheeks, with the eyes, veiled in transparent half-shadow.

From the numerous self-portraits Rembrandt painted, we know that for him the eyes were the most vital part of the human face. No other artist has ever achieved anything like the eloquence with which he was able to paint them. The eyes in this painting make no direct communication with us; they glow with an inner light. The shadow that half conceals them lends a certain mystery, giving us the feeling that the philosopher’s thoughts have entered a world of reverie. This shadow, this implication that the most communicative features in the face, the eyes, traditionally the seat of the soul, are beyond the border of clarity and comprehension, best accounts for the compelling power of the picture.

The almost infinite variety of subtly changing tones in the painting draws attention to one of its most extraordinary elements: the contrast between the extreme restraint of the color scheme, limited almost entirely to browns and yellows, and the great richness of the variation of tone and hue within this narrow range. Hardly two strokes of the brush seem to repeat the same tone. Rembrandt prepared a new mixture on the palette each time before touching the canvas with his brush. His brushwork, moreover, is always purposeful and sure. There is no hesitation evident anywhere. The oil medium is used to the fullest extent of its wide range, from the thickest and most opaque impasto to the smoothest and most deeply transparent glazes. Rembrandt had reached a time in his career as a painter when he knew exactly how to express the feelings and ideas that inspired him.

The commission to paint this picture, indeed, came to him at just the moment that we have come to regard as the finest period in his career. The order, as far as we know, was the only one that Rembrandt ever received from an Italian or, for that matter, from any foreign collector of note. Don Antonio Ruffo, who asked Rembrandt to paint this work, belonged to a family that had played an important role in Calabria ever since the early Middle Ages. He was born in 1610, four years after Rembrandt, and was the youngest of six children of the Duke of Baghna. After his father’s death, his mother, who came from a prominent family in Sicily, returned to Messina, where she built a large palace in the newly erected quarter near the harbor. Here Don Antonio made his home. He was a man of great wealth, who personally supervised the affairs of his estate. He also played an active part in the government of Messina. Five times elected senator, he led a successful opposition to the Count of Ayala, the Spanish viceroy, who tried to abrogate the ancient privileges of the city.

Don Antonio was a cultivated man and a lover of the arts. His tastes were reflected in his family life, for his sons were musicians, painters, and poets. His palace was a gathering place for artists, writers, and scientists, with whom he founded an academy of the fine arts. The palace was splendidly decorated with mythological frescoes, sculpture, goldsmiths’ work, and tapestries, the latter including a set designed by Rubens. The main hall was lined with busts of Greek and Roman heroes. He also had a collection of medals which was famous in its time, an important library, and a pinacoteca, or picture gallery, on which he lavished a great deal of attention. He carried on a lively correspondence with purchasing agents and the painters themselves, and kept a catalogue that listed each

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Fig. 1. Homer. Signed and dated 1663. Oil on canvas, 42 1/2 x 32 1/2 inches
Royal Picture Gallery (Mauritshuis), The Hague
painting, the artist's name, the measurements, the price, and the source from which it was acquired.

At the time when he commissioned this painting, Don Antonio’s collection was already an impressive one, and his catalogue listed pictures by Dürer, Lucas van Leyden, Titian, Van Dyck, Poussin, Ribera, Jordans, Guido Reni, Guercino, Mattia Preti, and Massimo Stanzionale. He was evidently interested both in the great masters of the past and the best in his own day, regardless of nationality. Much of his correspondence with contemporary painters has been preserved; it gives us a fascinating picture of the relationship between artists, their patrons, and the intermediaries who dealt in pictures during the seventeenth century. Though not of the stature of an imperial collector like the Archduke Leopold Wilhelm in Brussels, Ruflo had so much imagination and taste in bringing together his works of art that he must be regarded as the equal of such connoisseurs as Cassiano del Pozzo, Poussin’s sympathetic patron in Rome.

Ruflo probably commissioned the painting in 1652. There are no existing documents to prove this, for the original order has been lost, but Rembrandt signed the work in 1653, and we know that it arrived in Messina the following year on the ship “Bartolommeus.” The bill for the shipping charges still exists in the Ruflo archives, signed by a certain Cornelis Gysbert van Gaor, or van Goor, who was in contact with Rembrandt in Amsterdam, and received his orders from Ruflo’s agent in Messina. The bill is very detailed. It gives the price for the picture as 500 florins, which we know from later correspondence was considered a very high one. Indeed, Don Antonio wrote that it was four times the sum that he was accustomed to pay the most prominent Italian artists for the same kind of painting. The bill also lists the price for the box, for packing, for weighing, and for loading on board ship—all vivid details which bring us very close to this significant transaction.

Because the original order for the picture has been lost, the identification of the subject presents a complex problem. In the past it has been interpreted in various ways, and called a Philosopher, a Savant, a portrait of the Italian poet Torquato Tasso or of the Dutch historian Van Hooft. The presence of the bust of Homer, however, and of the medal with a profile of Alexander hanging on the figure’s elaborate golden chain are enough to indicate that a representation of Aristotle is intended. The association of these three men brings to mind the old stories about Alexander when Aristotle was his tutor. Alexander considered Homer’s Iliad the perfect portable treasure of all military virtue and knowledge, and slept with the “casket copy” of the book, corrected by Aristotle, always under his pillow next to his dagger. But surely the most convincing evidence of the subject is the description in Ruflo’s catalogue: “Aristotele che tiene una mano sopra una statua”—Aristotle holding one hand on a statue.

Rembrandt’s conception of the philosopher is the only example in all of his work of a humanistic theme of this nature, and it is interesting to wonder who originated this moving and poetic idea. At first, one might think that it came from Don Antonio in his original commission for the picture, since he was a product of Mediterranean civilization, brought up among the ruins of classical antiquity in what had been Magna Graecia. There must have been constant reminders of the ancient world in the decoration of his palace and in many of the objects in his collection. We also know from the inventory of the collection that he owned a bronze bust of Aristotle.

It is strange, however, that in his correspondence with Guercino about a painting to hang with the Rembrandt, he never mentioned its subject, nor does he seem to have done so in at least two other such commissions. Nevertheless, Rembrandt’s painting connects both Alexander and Homer with the philosopher, and the artist also made separate paintings of these figures, as explained below. From the inventory of Rembrandt’s possessions, finally, we know that he too owned a bust of Aristotle, as well as one of Homer. In fact, he probably used the latter as a model for this picture.

It is, therefore, quite possible that Don Antonio’s original order was only for a philosopher, and that it was Rembrandt who conceived the idea of sending him an Aristotle. Since the letters commissioning the picture are lost, this problem will probably never be solved, and it is best to think of the work as a collaboration between the
Fig. 2. Alexander. Signed and dated 1655. Oil on canvas, 53 3/4 x 40 3/4 inches
The Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum Collection
Sicilian nobleman and the Dutch painter, who brought his deep human understanding to the interpretation of a classical subject, making a marvelous marriage of northern sensibility with Mediterranean humanism.

Don Antonio was apparently delighted with his new picture, and considered it one of the most important of his collection. He seems to have been most anxious that it look well, because in subsequent years he asked no less than five painters to execute paintings to hang with it. He turned first to Guercino, the great Bolognese, who was seventy years old at this time, and at the end of his long career. The form of Don Antonio's request to this painter shows that Ruffo not only loved art, but knew a good deal about painting, for he specifically requested that Guercino carry out the companion to the Aristotle not in the style in which he was painting at this time of his life but in his earlier, broad ("gagliardo") manner, so that it would fit better with the style of the Rembrandt. (His judgment coincides with modern taste, for we too prefer Guercino's early manner.) Ruffo also commissioned companion pieces from Mattia Preti, called Il Calabrese, and from Giacinto Brandi. He wanted to have one painted by Salvator Rosa, but this temperamental artist refused.

Ten years after the Aristotle was painted, Rembrandt himself made two related paintings, for which bills and correspondence still exist, a Homer and an Alexander. The Homer, which was described in the catalogue as Homer Dictating to Two Pupils, is in all probability to be identified with the Homer now in the Mauritshuis in The Hague (Figure 1). This picture, somewhat damaged, is certainly cut down from a larger one, since there still exists, in the lower right-hand corner, a fragment of the hand of one of the scribes.

There are two pictures of Alexander, both of which may have been painted to accompany the Aristotle. The story behind them provides us with a sidelight upon the relationship of the artist and his patron. When one painting of Alexander arrived in Messina, in 1661, Don Antonio was by no means so pleased as he had been with the Aristotle. He was indignant at discovering that the new painting was made up of four pieces of canvas sewed together with visible seams that spoiled its effect, and wrote a bitter complaint to Rembrandt in Amsterdam, accusing him of having enlarged a small picture in order to avoid the work entailed in fulfilling the commission for a half-length. A painting by Rembrandt of Alexander, now in the Glasgow Art Gallery (Figure 2), could be the one that Don Antonio complained about, for it is indeed made up of several pieces of canvas sewed together, obviously with the intention of enlarging a picture that had consisted originally only of a head and shoulders and the upper part of a shield.

In his rather blunt answer to Don Antonio's complaint, Rembrandt began by expressing his astonishment that his picture was not considered satisfactory, asserting that if it were hung in the proper light, the seams would not be visible. He did, however, go on to say that he was willing to paint another version for 600 florins. Although we do not have Ruffo's answer, his correspondence with Mattia Preti contains a letter in which Preti congratulates his patron on having re-
ceived a second Alexander more to his taste than the first. This suggests that Rembrandt did paint a second version and sent it to Messina. This is perhaps a picture which was sold in Amsterdam at the end of the eighteenth century, belonged subsequently to the imperial collections in Saint Petersburg, and is now in the Gulbenkian Collection in Lisbon (Figure 4).

Before his death, Don Antonio chose a group of one hundred pictures which he considered the best of his collection, and in his will directed that they should be the heritage in perpetuity of the eldest son in his branch of the Ruffo-Scaletta family. The Aristotle and its two companion pieces were included in this provision, and passed on down through the family until 1743 when not only the eldest son but all his brothers as well died of the plague. The inheritance went to a cadet branch of the family, and shortly after this Don Antonio’s original will was apparently broken, and some pictures were sold. The Alexander now in Lisbon, for instance, appeared at an auction in Amsterdam in 1765. There is no documentary evidence concerning the sale of the Aristotle, which, however, along with the Homer, was probably sold in Naples before 1815.

Both pictures went to England, and Sir Abraham Hume, Bart. had become the owner of the Aristotle by 1815, when he lent it to an exhibition at the British Institution in London. Hume was the first of a series of extraordinary collectors who subsequently owned the picture. He was an amateur painter and a man of considerable distinction and learning. His research in natural history and mineralogy had caused him to be made a Fellow of the Royal Society. He was also one of the founders of the British Institution and was acquainted with all the connoisseurs of his day. He was an intimate friend of Sir Joshua Reynolds, who painted three portraits of him and mentioned him in his will. Venetian painting particularly interested him, and he published, anonymously, a book on the life and works of Titian.

At Hume’s death the collection, including the Aristotle, passed first to his grandson, Viscount Alford, and then to his great-grandson, the Earl of Brownlow. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, one of the earl’s descendants sold the picture to Rodolphe Kann in Paris. Kann, who was an associate of Cecil Rhodes and Otto Beit, had made a large fortune in South Africa, which he used to bring together one of the most remarkable collections formed at the end of the last century. He was particularly fond of Rembrandt and owned eleven paintings by him. After Kann’s death, his collection was bought by Duveen in 1907, and the pictures were sold to various American collectors. It is interesting to note that twenty-two paintings from the Kann collection have since found their way into the Metropolitan Museum, among them—besides the new acquisition—six of our finest Rembrandts, including the Man with a Magnifying Glass, its companion the Lady with a Pink, and the Portrait of Titus.

Duveen sold the Aristotle to the widow of Collis P. Huntington, who was adding a number of masterpieces to the collection she had in-

Fig. 4. Alexander. Oil on canvas, 46 3/4 x 35 3/4 inches
Gulbenkian Collection, Lisbon
herited from her husband, one of the founders of the Southern Pacific Railway. When Mrs. Huntington died in 1924, her son Archer gave the Museum as a memorial to his father the Flora and the Hendrickje Stoffels by Rembrandt and a portrait by Frans Hals. In the letter to the Museum signifying his desire to make this gift, Archer Huntington wrote, “To avoid any confusion I will state I do not include the painting by Rembrandt known as Portrait of a Savant [the Aristotle] . . . as this I shall retain for my own home at a future date.” It is tantalizing to think that the picture might have come to the Museum at that time as a gift.

Mr. Huntington did not in fact keep the painting for himself, but eventually sold it to Duveen, using the proceeds in the construction of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Duveen sold it in turn to Alfred W. Erickson, a prominent New York advertising man. Like the earlier owners of the picture, he was a man of taste and discrimination, whose collection, though small, was extremely distinguished. His experience with this picture was unusual, and gives evidence of the very real attachment that he felt for it. Having suffered financial losses in the depression of 1929, he was obliged to sell the picture back to Duveen. In 1935, however, as soon as his fortunes were remade, he reclaimed his Rembrandt. After his death, it remained in the possession of his widow, and thanks to her never-failing kindness, the writer and many other art lovers were able to admire and study it in the charming and intimate atmosphere of her home on Thirty-fifth Street.

The unusually complete record of ownership is of great significance, revealing, as it does, how many of the successive owners were collectors of distinction and prized the painting. One could hardly ask for better evidence of the picture’s extraordinary importance than the fact that it has been treasured in this way over so many years.

The distinguished history of our picture is not surprising, because the painting is unique among all of Rembrandt’s works. In the few that are comparable—the Jewish Bride, the Prodigal Son, or his greatest portraits—his power comes from the vivid and compelling way in which he communicates to us the deepest and tenderest human emotions. When we look at the people in these pictures, we are strongly moved by our sense of intimate contact with them and their innermost feelings. Our response to them, however, is focused on the particular personality or event that the artist has represented. The Lady with a Pink, for example, in the Museum’s Altman collection, is, like Aristotle, absorbed in thought, but our reactions are sympathy and understanding of a very individual human woman. When we look at the Aristotle, we are not concerned with him as an individual. Our thoughts are lifted to another realm—the realm of universal speculation, the highest to which man’s mind can aspire. This is undoubtedly due to Rembrandt’s combining the representation of Aristotle with an image of the blind Homer. The greatest philosopher, who was reputed to possess a compendium of all human knowledge, is pictured here with the father of all poetry, and it is the presence of the bust of Homer that symbolizes the heights to which his meditation soars. The artist himself in this case seems to have been inspired by his subject to produce one of his loftiest creations.

NOTE
This preliminary study of the Museum's Aristotle has been based largely on Duke Vincenzo Ruffo's publication of the documents concerning his ancestor's collection in Bollettino d'arte X (1916) pp. 21 ff., 95 ff., 165 ff. 237 ff., 284 ff., and 369 ff.