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The Moment in Rembrandt's 'Night Watch'

The Musket Blast, Narrative Drama, and Moral Excellence

by Joseph Manca



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## The Moment in Rembrandt's 'Night Watch' The Musket Blast, Narrative Drama, and Moral Excellence

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Rembrandt van Rijn's famous Night Watch is a complex painting and operates on many different levels. This article stresses both the narrative and the moral qualities of the painting, and looks at the interplay between art and philosophy, with a focus on the moment represented and how an incident plays out in a broadly ethical sense across the picture. The painting achieves a kind of unity through the representation of the musket blast, which disturbs or affects a good number of the figures in the scene. In addition, the lack of reaction to the shot on the part of the captain and lieutenant offers us a vivid image of military bravery and firm leadership: they remain focused on their duties, and carry out their tasks with stoical calm. The moment of the firing of the gun thus helps to explain both some of the figural action as well as offering an essential moral meaning of Rembrandt's masterpiece.



The oeuvre of Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669) comprises striking subject matter, a succession of bold styles, and varied media, and he drew inspiration from other artists. It is hardly surprising that when Rembrandt painted his *Night Watch* (*De Nachtwacht*), signed and dated 1642, he created a complex work that is stratified in meaning and rich in effect (Fig. 1). *The Night Watch*, in addition to being a set of portraits interspersed with emblematic and symbolic figures, presents a dramatic staging of a vivid event: a man is firing a musket and is

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eliciting a variety of reactions. In particular, the blast occurs just behind the two principal figures, and it is significant that they are unconcerned with the sound and remain calmly focused on their duties.

A summary of the commission might be useful here. Rembrandt painted *The Night Watch* for the militia company of Amsterdam arquebusiers (*kloveniers* in Dutch, shooters of a type of musket) led by Captain Frans Banning (or Banninck) Cocq (1605-1655) and Lieutenant Willem van Ruytenburch (or Ruytenburgh) (1600-1652).<sup>1</sup> The picture hung in the Great Hall of the Kloveniersdoelen, the headquarter building for Amsterdam's civic groups of musketeers, until 1715, when it was moved to the town hall and cut down somewhat to fit into the new setting. A copy by Amsterdam painter Gerrit Lundens (1622-1686) records the original full extent of the large canvas (Fig. 2).<sup>2</sup> The Great Hall commissions included a painting by Govert Flinck (1615-1660) of the governors of the Kloveniers; *The Night Watch*; and five other paintings of militia companies, which kept law and order in their assigned sections of Amsterdam, and could also stand up to the nation's external enemies if called upon to do so.<sup>3</sup> Six different artists,

<sup>1</sup> The Rijksmuseum gives the title in English as Militia Company of District II under the Command of Captain Frans Banninck Cocq, Known as the 'Night Watch'. The notes here can offer only a sample of the numerous studies of the painting. See subsequent notes, as well as: Jan Six, "Plaats en tijd van Rembrandt's Nachtwacht", Onze Kunst 35 (1919): 1-20; Marijke Kok, "Rembrandts Nachtwacht: Van feeststoet tot schuttersstuk", Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum 15 (1967): 116-121; Ton Koot, Rembrandt's Night Watch: A Fascinating Story (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff International, 1969); Margaret D. Carroll, "Rembrandt's Nightwatch and the Iconological Traditions of Militia Company Portraiture in Amsterdam", Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1977; Willem Hijmans, Luitsen Kuiper, and Annemarie Vels Heijn, Rembrandt's Nightwatch: The History of a Painting (Alphen aan den Rijn: A. W. Sijthoff, 1978); Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann, Rembrandt: "The Nightwatch" (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); Josua Bruyn et al. [Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project], A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings, III, 1635-1642 (Dordrecht, Boston, and London: Martinus Nijhoff, 1989), 430-485; Christian Tümpel and Astrid Tümpel, Rembrandt: Images and Metaphors (London: Haus Publishing, 2006), 176-183; Harry Berger, Jr., Manhood, Marriage, and Mischief: Rembrandt's "Night Watch" and other Dutch Group Portraits (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> National Gallery, London, inv. NG289; Rijksmuseum inv. SK–C-1453.

<sup>3</sup> For Dutch shooting companies in general at that time, with mention of *The Night Watch*, see Paul Knevel, *Burgers in het geweer: De schutterijen in Holland*, *1550-1700* (Hilversum: Historische Vereniging Holland and Uitgeverij Verloren, *1994*). See also Paul Knevel, "Armed Citizens: The Representation of the Civic Militias in the Seventeenth Century", in Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., and Adele Seeff, eds., *The Public and Private in Dutch Culture of the Golden Age* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2000), 85-99. See also comparative material in Marijke Carasso-Kok and J. Levyall working c. 1639-1645, painted each of the group portraits of musketeers: Rembrandt, Bartholomeus van der Helst (1613-1670), Govert Flinck, Joachim von Sandrart (1606-1688), Nicolaes Eliasz Pickenoy (1588-1653/1656), and Jacob Backer (1609-1651).<sup>1</sup>

For his contribution, Rembrandt received generous payment from the captain (finely clad in dark clothing and red sash, prominently gesturing in the foreground) and lieutenant (next to him, elegantly dressed in yellowish garb and white sash), and lesser amounts from sixteen other men who are portrayed.<sup>2</sup> Over a dozen other figures staff the scene beyond those who paid for their likenesses.<sup>3</sup> The traditional title *De Nachtwacht* is a misnomer on two accounts: it represents neither the nighttime (the dark surface before the post-WWII cleaning suggested a night scene), nor a watch, and the scene is more redolent of a ceremonial marching out than a true civic patrol. An early description or long title, found next to a copy of c. 1649-1655 in a family album made for Frans Banning Cocq, conveys the subject matter of the main foreground action: "Sketch of the painting in the large hall of the Kloveniersdoelen, in which the Lord of Purmerland, as captain, summons his lieutenant, Lord of Vlaardingen, to order his company of citizens to march out".<sup>4</sup>

Dordrecht painter and art theorist Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627-1678) stated

van Halm, eds., *Schutters in Holland: Kkracht en zenuwen van de stad* (Zwolle: Waanders, 1988). <sup>1</sup> The companion pictures are all in the Rijksmuseum. For a reconstruction of the room, see Gary Schwart, *The Night Watch: Rijksmuseum Dossiers* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2002), 1-14, especially 6-7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Seymour Slive argued against the notion that *The Night Watch* displeased its patrons; see his *Rembrandt and His Critics, 1630-1730* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1953), 4-7. The greater payment of the captain and lieutenant is suggested by the early document indicating that the men paid "according to the place each occupied" in the picture ("nae de plaats, di sij daer in hadden"); see Bruyn, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings, III*, 481.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> For the *identity of all those who paid for their portraits, see* Sebastien A.C. Dudok van Heel, "Frans Banninck Cocq's Troop in Rembrandt's *Night Watch*: The Identification of the Guardsmen", *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin* 57 (2009): 42-87. The shield within Rembrandt's painting including the names of the militia men was added early on but by another hand.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> For the florid inscription and the album copy, done in black chalk and watercolor on paper, see Haverkamp-Begemann, *Rembrandt*, 25-27, Fig. 43; Mariët Westermann, *Rembrandt* (London: Phaidon, 2000), 166-167, Fig. 105; and Herman T. Colenbrander, "The *Night Watch*. Captain Frans Banninck Cocq: 'Pugno pro Patrial'.", in M. Roscam Abbing, ed., *Rembrandt 2006: Essays* (Leiden: Foleor, 2006), 9-13. The copy in Banning Cocq's album is after the painting by Lundens (Fig. 2 here), not after Rembrandt's original.

that Rembrandt exercised his choice ("verkiezing") in making more of the commission than the mere capturing of likenesses, that writer's assessment alluding to what we recognize as the richness and complexity of the picture, however unified as an artwork it might be.<sup>1</sup> Modern interpretations are numerous, but do not necessarily contradict each other, as Rembrandt seems to have calculated it to function on a number of levels. Like other great works of art, The Night Watch can accommodate more than one analysis and conclusion. It represents a military unit, but gives character to the men as individuals as never before in Dutch group portraiture.<sup>2</sup> It seems naturalistic and even real, but comes across as staged and theatrical.<sup>3</sup> The picture shows the marching out of a militia company, but is also redolent of the gathering of armed men attending a triumphal entry or other festive, public occasion.<sup>4</sup> The total scene is a bit unruly, but represents the very men responsible for bringing order to the city. The picture embodies reference or allusion to upstanding and sober art of the past, such as Raphael's School of Athens (Fig. 3), but some observers have also detected the spirit of humor and even parody in Rembrandt's painting.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> An analysis of group portraiture in the Netherlands, with consideration of friendship portraits and shooting portraits and how those traditions relate to *The Night Watch*, appears in Ann Jensen Adams, *Public Faces and Private Identities in Seventeenth-Century Holland: Portraiture and the Production of Community* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 211-258.

<sup>4</sup> For *The Night Watch* and triumphal arches, including discussion of the entry of Marie de' Medici into Amsterdam in September of 1638, see Christian Tümpel, "Beobachtungen zur *Nachtwache*", in Otto von Simson and Jan Kelch, eds., *Neue Beiträge zur Rembrandt-Forschung* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 1973), 162-175; Gary Schwartz, *Rembrandt: His Life, His Paintings* (New York: Viking, 1985), 209-213; Schwartz, *The Night Watch: Rijksmuseum Dossiers*, 24-30; Alison McNeil Kettering, *Rembrandt's Group Portraits* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2006), 26; and Sebastien A.C. Dudok van Heel, "*The Night Watch* and the Entry of Marie de' Medici: A New Interpretation of the Original Place and Significance of the Painting", *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin* 57 (2009): 4-41.

<sup>5</sup> See the extensive and fundamental study of Rembrandt and his reliance on Italian art, including mention of *The School of Athens* and *The Night Watch*, in Kenneth Clark, *Rembrandt and the* 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Samuel van Hoogstraten [Hoogstraten], *Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilderkonst: Anders de zichtbaere werelt* (Rotterdam: Francois van Hoogstraten, 1678), 176.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Considerations of Rembrandt, theater, and *The Night Watch* appear in Wytje Gerbens Hellinga, *Rembrandt Fecit 1642. De Nachtwacht. Gysbrecht van Aemstel* (Amsterdam: J. M. Meulenhoff, 1956); Rudolf H. Fuchs, *Rembrandt in Amsterdam* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1969), 33-38; and Henri van de Waal, "Rembrandt at Vondel's Tragedy *Gijsbreght van Aemstel*", in Rudolf H. Fuchs, ed., *Steps towards Rembrandt: Collected Articles 1937-1972*, trans. Patricia Wardle and Alan Griffiths (Amsterdam and London: North-Holland Publishing, 1974), 73-79.



The architectural setting is idealized and based on no existing place, and because of that, the inclusion of several historicizing costumes, and the presence of two fancily clad little girls, one of whom bears symbols of the militia group, some scholars have interpreted the scene as being only emblematic and as fundamentally meant to be understood as not actually occurring.<sup>1</sup> It is doubtless true that it is hardly intended to be a snapshot of an historical moment. Yet, the painting feels remarkably present. Unlike some Baroque artists, Rembrandt did not specialize in fantastic allegories or favor the representation of cold concepts. The way that Banning Cocq's right arm and Van Ruytenburch's weapon (known as a partisan) seem to jut out past the picture plane helps the scene appear palpable and convincing. Rembrandt was paid to create likenesses of real men, and he gives us a series of vivid portraits. He also managed to embed a vivid story, comprising a chain of events in which men act and then react to what is occurring in their space. The Night Watch is like an Italian istoria in that regard, as are many other works by Rembrandt.<sup>2</sup> The importance of action, gesture, and human emotion was something that Rembrandt learned from his broad studies of earlier art and from the brief time learning from a teacher, Pieter Lastman (1583-1633). Narrative paintings by Rembrandt often comprise a lively central

*Italian Renaissance* (London: John Murray, 1966), 85-89 and passim. For other thoughts about Rembrandt and Italy, see Harry Berger, Jr., *Fictions of the Pose: Rembrandt against the Italian Renaissance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

<sup>1</sup> The claws of the chicken, the pistol suspended from her waist, and the ceremonial goblet she carries relate in different ways to the militia group; see the analysis in Haverkamp-Begemann, *Rembrandt*, 46-47 and 93-101; and Tümpel and Tümpel, *Rembrandt*, 181. For the historical costumes, widely discussed in the literature, see, for example, Haverkamp-Begemann, *Rembrandt*, 84-93. For the emblematic quality of the girls and other figures in *The Night Watch*, see also Simon Schama, *Rembrandt*'s *Eyes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 498-499.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to showing Italian influence on the artist, Clark, *Rembrandt and the Italian Renaissance*, 201-204, lists the collections of prints in Rembrandt's 1656 inventory that were by or after works by Italian masters such as Andrea Mantegna, Raphael, Antonio Tempesta, Guido Reni, and others. For Rembrandt's *Night Watch* and Raphael and other Italian artists, see also Jürgen Müller, *Der sokratische Künstler: Studien zu Rembrandts "Nachtwache"* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015), 226-307.

event that is accompanied by ripples of reaction, whether it is *The Blinding of Samson* (Fig. 4) or *Belshazzar's Feast* (Fig. 5), and such story-telling occurred especially in narrative prints and paintings through the 1640s. Rembrandt's art repeatedly offers representations of warm and emotive figures presented in a dramatic narration, and in *The Night Watch* he created a painting that would stand out at the Kloveniersdoelen.

While *The Night Watch* is above all a group portrait, it comprises a moment, somehow both subtle and salient, within that larger scheme: while the captain conveys a summons to the lieutenant, a musket blast is occurring behind them (Fig. 6). The shooting of bullets during such a march was not allowed, so this is either a forbidden shot or the firing of a blank. The smoky blast is difficult to discern at first, and takes careful looking on our part. Crouching behind and to the left of the captain stands a shortish man (possibly an older youth) in a helmet who is aiming straight ahead and slightly upwards in the direction of the viewer's right. The blast animates, involves, or affects more than a few figures. We can most cogently interpret some glances and actions as focused on the action and sound, and not on the adjacent captain and lieutenant, both of whom face away from the others; and the lieutenant is only just receiving the summons and has not yet tried to gain anyone's attention behind him. Most salient among those responding to the blast is Jan Adriaensen Keijser (1594-1664), the man directly between the leading officers who is raising his hand, which is just below the barrel of the gun. He acts in apparent self-protection and is perhaps deflecting the weapon and the shot, if there was one, upwards. His face is animated with surprise and perhaps fear, and in his involuntary reaction he raises up the sword in his left hand, visible over the head and to the right of the lieutenant. For her part, the little girl left of center (Fig. 7) looks with apparent concern in the direction of the shooter, and the smoke wafts back in her direction. Again, the mild distress detectable on her face is consistent with her looking at the firing, not at the two militia officers. Similarly, the little boy on the left, who is walking or running down the stairs and is dressed in a humorously oversized man's helmet, turns to look back toward the source of the apparently unexpected sound (Fig. 7). There are adults in the picture who do not react, but it is fitting that the children, who are the least capable of suppressing their fears or involuntary reactions, both turn toward the location of the blast.



Among the other figures, starting from the right, second sergeant Rombout Kemp (1597-1653) points toward the blast-gesturing, it appears, behind the plane of the leaders and not at them-and he could be saying something about it to Paulus van Schoonhoven (1595-1679; on the very far right), who looks in the same direction as Kemp.<sup>1</sup> Walich Schellingwou (1613-1653), who holds a long pike on the right with a small red ribbon tied near the end of the shaft, is engaged with the shooting in two ways. First, if the gun was loaded with a lead ball, he may possibly have been challenging the shooter to hit the ribbon, and thus he would have encouraged the shot itself. Even if that is not the case, he seems aware that his pike is being lightly struck by the sword that the aforementioned man between the officers is raising in violent surprise with his left arm. The two men over the head of the captain, left (helmeted; unidentified) and right (in a hat; identified as Jan Ockersen, 1599-1652), are looking to their left, away from the captain and generally in the direction of the emission point of the blast. Another militiaman apparently intrigued by the gunman's sound is Elbert Willemsz Swedenrijck (1589-1644), on the left behind the ensign's banner (he can hear, but not see), and perhaps two more men on the left are doing the same (one of whom appears in the early copy that shows the now cutaway strip; Fig. 2). The much-discussed unity of the painting is owing in part to the engagement with the shot by more than a few figures across the picture. The shot turns the scene into a sensorial experience, as the actors can see the shooter, or hear the blast, or smell the smoke.

In addition to the shooter and those surprised by the noise, other figures relate directly to active musketry, including the older man right of center (Jan Claesen Leijdeckers, 1597-1640) blowing powder out of the pan of his musket, and the prominent guardsman in red on the left, Jan van der Heede (1610-1655), who is loading his gun. All in all, and not surprisingly, the painting is, among

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The identifications and life dates of the militiamen mentioned in this article follow Dudok van Heel's, "Frans Banninck Cocq's Troop".

other things, about guns and shooting, fitting for a militia company's group portrait. Bartholomeus van der Helst's large painting for the room also included a prominent gunman in a position to shoot (Fig. 8). In *The Night Watch*, Rembrandt made his disruptive musketeer the cause of action and reaction throughout the scene, and the artist signed his name and marked the date of the picture on the riser of the lowest stair between the musketeer's legs: "Rembrandt f[ecit] 1642".

The shot and the reaction to it in The Night Watch are, to say the least, undermentioned in the Rembrandt literature. But, although his overall conclusions about the painting differ greatly from those offered here, Harry Berger, Jr., raised the issue of the shooter and the role of his action in the picture, and Peter Greenaway constructed a story in film and a book that centers around the shot.<sup>1</sup> Some downplay the action because they believe that it is to be understood as not actually happening, one argument being that shooting was forbidden during militia marches. This particular gunman is in garb from the previous century and wears oak leaves, which were emblems of fortitude and military virtue and unlikely to be worn in everyday life in a marching out. The discussion in the Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings rightly argued against an "overemphasis on the reality of the picture", and that study stressed the overall symbolic and allegorical nature of the great picture, including the unreality of the shooter.<sup>2</sup> Fair enough, but some others in the picture, including real guardsmen who paid for their portraits, wear articles of historical clothing, and they are manifestly present along with the shooter. Moreover, as we have seen, there is evident reaction to the blast from those within the picture. The little girl in white is apparently looking toward the shooter, so both she and he must have some

 $^2$  Bruyn, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings, III*, 456, with a discussion of the iconography of oak leaves as long-standing symbols of strength and virtue.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> See Berger, *Manhood, Marriage, and Mischief*, especially 1-3 and 185-190; Peter Greenaway, *Nightwatching: A View of Rembrandt's The Night Watch* (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 2006). For another interpretation that sees the shooter as an active presence in the scene, see an extended analysis of the painting in Michael Bockemühl, *Rembrandt: The Mystery of the Revealed Form* (Cologne: Taschen, 2000), 49-57. For the firing gunman and two other musketeers in the picture, see analyses in Margaret D. Carroll, "Accidents Will Happen: The Case of *The Nightwatch*", in Alan Chong and Michael Zell, eds., *Rethinking Rembrandt* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2002), 91-105; and Jürgen Müller, "Rembrandts 'Nachtwache'. Anmerkungen zur impliziten Kunsttheorie", *Morgen-Glants. Zeitschrift der Christian Knorr von Rosenroth-Gesellschaft* 9 (1999): 139-156.

real and effective presence. Even if the girl and the shooter are somehow not real, the breadth of Rembrandt's artistic mind would surely have enabled him to conceive of a scene where interaction between different kinds of figures is understood to be occurring. There was a long tradition in European art of scenes in one space where ideal and real—even contemporary—figures engage with each other. Surely Rembrandt could envision, and represent, a gunman in older costume and adorned with oak leaves who patently causes ripples of reaction in *The Night Watch*; his presence is clear to figures acting out the scene. In part, he forms the middle member of a three-part sequence of loading, shooting, and cleaning of a gun, as is occurring within the picture.

The noisy blast helps to highlight the moral excellence of the two officers. Rembrandt depicted the captain and lieutenant more prominently than the others, reflecting their social status, leadership, and, to be sure, the higher payments they made to the artist. Rembrandt allows us easily to distinguish the two men from those of lower rank, a distinction that was less clear in the companion pieces in the room (cf. Fig. 8). Through their position in the front plane, Rembrandt singles out and flatters the captain and lieutenant. Beyond that, their relationship to the shooting further sets the officers apart and elevates them in a moral way. The end of the barrel of the musket blasts off near the right ear of the lieutenant, and smoke hovers around his head, yet he remains unflinching. The captain is also undisturbed by the firing, and he remains focused on his immediate task of conveying the command to Van Ruytenburch. Despite the chaos and noise behind them, the two men are steadfast in their duties and unmoved by the din, and they stand in contrast to those others who are surprised by, or focusing their attention on, the blast. The captain and lieutenant were part of the regent elite and, in addition to their positions with the militia in Amsterdam, might as members of a high-ranking social class have been expected to remain untroubled by mundane matters. Rembrandt makes clear what we logically expect: the leading officers, virile and genteel, possess unflappable character and remain calm before sudden, adjacent disturbance. Their noble disregard distinguishes them from their men, but also unites the offices with the others in the setting: given their hardiness and fitness to rule, the prominent representation of the leaders in the picture makes more sense, and reassures us that the hierarchy depicted is just and sensible. The ability to remain unmoved by distractions, danger, and other external turbulence was a long-standing hallmark of manly virtue, and was a chief element of self-mastery and fortitude. In addition to being generally virile, bravery in the face of danger and noise are expected features of the excellent military man, and the captain and lieutenant are shown to be especially fit for their positions.

The officers in The Night Watch are steadfast and in unflinching control, and we can also wonder whether the picture reflects stoical thought. There is no secure evidence that either Rembrandt or his patrons here subscribed to systematic tenets of the various forms of stoical belief, but it is relevant to note the widespread admiration of Neostoicism in seventeenth-century Europe, and in the Netherlands in particular. Looking at the Dutch Republic, literary historian Maria A. Schenkeveld concluded that "the fashionable philosophy of the seventeenth century intelligentsia (...) had been that of neostoicism". She noted that, far from being admired by only a narrow group of philosophers, many individuals also made the attempt to behave stoically in their daily lives, and, in the cultural realm, "stoicism triumphed on the Dutch stage".<sup>1</sup> Neostoic philosopher Justus Lipsius (1547-1606), who taught at Leiden for eleven years beginning in 1579, was a widely selling author, and his De Constantia (On Constancy), published in 1584, was particularly sought after and translated into several languages for broader readership.<sup>2</sup> Among his other teachings, Lipsius encouraged personal fortitude and constancy in the face of difficulty, and, far from advocating passivity, he emphasized citizenship and one's duty to the civic homeland, with individuals spurred on by a moderate "amor patriae".<sup>3</sup> The leaders in The Night Watch demonstrate the fortitude and moral constancy that were needed in the Dutch Republic.



<sup>1</sup> Maria A. Schenkeveld, *Dutch Literature in the Age of Rembrandt: Themes and Ideas* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1991), 63-64.

<sup>3</sup> Lipsius, Concerning Constancy, especially 45-49.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Robert V. Young, "Introduction", in Justus Lipsius, *Concerning Constancy*, ed. and trans. Robert V. Young (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2011), xvii-xxx and passim.

Stoical ideas in the seventeenth century found adherents across society, including, among artists, masters as diverse in style and life circumstances as Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) and Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665). Rubens painted himself (standing) gathered together in philosophical union with Justus Lipsius, along with Joannes Woverius (Jan van den Wouwer; 1576-1636), and older brother Philip Rubens (second from left; 1574-1611), both of whom had studied with Lipsius at the university in Leuven (Fig. 9).<sup>1</sup> Poussin's painting Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake (1648; Fig. 10) reflects stoicizing interest in human response in a manner that recalls The Night Watch, with one man in agony, two figures reacting to his ordeal with terror or surprise, and others in a placid or unknowing state because of their removal from the upheaval.<sup>2</sup> For his part, Salvator Rosa (1615-1673), a contemporary of Rembrandt, embraced stoical ideas in his art and writings.<sup>3</sup> In considering the moral context of the action in *The Night* Watch, it is useful to acknowledge that Neostoicism and interest in ancient Stoicism was in the air in seventeenth-century Europe, and was embraced by the higher intellectual and social ranks of society or by those who aspired to join those ranks. Such ideas were especially appealing during the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648): in the face of brutal European upheaval, a philosophy of hardiness and unconcern with danger offered solace and helped one turn away from the turgid world and achieve calm, self-control, and steadfastness before peril and misfortune.

Stoics were interested in emotional reactions and control of them, and Rembrandt frequently explored the question of human reaction, whether in individual figures and faces or in narrative art, and he applied that research in *The Night Watch*. Franziska Gottwald has related Rembrandt's art to Neostoicism through

<sup>1</sup> The figure on the right had earlier been widely identified as legal scholar Hugo Grotius (1583-1645). For the identification as Woverius, see Hans Vlieghe, *Rubens Portraits of Identified Sitters Painted in Antwerp* (London: Harvey Miller, 1987), no. 117, 128-139. For the Stoic context of the picture within Rubens' oeuvre, see Ulrich Heinen, "Stoisch sterben lernen—Rubens' *Memorialbild auf Justus Lipsius und Philip Rubens*", in Katlijne van der Stighelen, Hannelore Magnus, and Bert Watteeuw, eds., *Pokerfaced: Flemish and Dutch Baroque Faces Unveiled* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 25-68.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Blunt laid out the case for Poussin's sympathy with Stoicism in *Nicolas Poussin*, 2 vols. (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1967), 1: 157-176.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Richard W. Wallace, "The Genius of Salvator Rosa", *The Art Bulletin* 47 (1965): 471-480.

a consideration of the psychological response in the artist's etched self-portraits and through an exploration of the link between Rembrandt and philosophical ideas of the time. Gottwald focused on the emotion of anger in the work of Rembrandt and other Dutch or Flemish artists and writers, such as Karel van Mander (1548-1606) and his *Schilder-boeck*, and noted how the widely read Seneca the Younger and other Stoic philosophers addressed that emotion.<sup>1</sup> By 1656, Rembrandt possessed a copy of the neostoicizing tragedy *Medea* by Jan Six (1618-1700), who also sat for Rembrandt for portraits.<sup>2</sup> More generally, the painter owned works of ancient poetry, and the themes therein found expression in his art.<sup>3</sup> Rembrandt's *Aristotle with a Bust of Homer* (Fig. 11) shows a struggle between worldly pleasures and finery (fine costume and golden jewelry) versus loftier ideals of literary excellence and skill in describing heroic actions.<sup>4</sup>

There is a natural affinity between stoicism and military virtues, and it was hardly surprising that Marcus Aurelius wrote his *Meditations* while in northern and eastern Europe on an extended military campaign. Rembrandt would not have been the first Dutch artist to suggest stoical ideas in connection with an Amsterdam gathering of militia men, as a group portrait of 1531 (Fig. 12) includes a remarkable inscription in translation from the Stoic Seneca the Younger's dialogue *De vita beata*: "Wy zyn door deezen plechtighen eed verbonden de waereldsche zaaken gheduldig te verdraaghen, en ons niet te laaten beroeren door die zaaken die wy viet in onse macht hebben om te vermyden" ("We are bonded by this solemn oath to bear worldly matters patiently and to not let us be affected by matters we do not have the power to avoid").<sup>5</sup> This sentiment,

<sup>3</sup> Golahny, Rembrandt's Reading, especially 99-179.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Franziska Gottwald, "Rembrandts sogenannte 'Physiognomische Studien' im Kontext von Humanismus und Neostoizismus", *Nederlands kunsthistorisch jaarboek* 60 (2010): 203-231.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> For Rembrandt's reading of ancient thought and literature, based on a review of his books listed in his household inventory of 1656, see Amy Golahny, *Rembrandt's Reading: The Artist's Bookshelf of Ancient Poetry and History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003); Six's *Medea* is noted on p. 77. For Rembrandt's *Night Watch* and drama of Joost van den Vondel, see Hellinga, *Rembrandt Fecit 1642*, especially 18-55.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Julius Held, *Rembrandt's Aristotle and Other Rembrandt Studies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 3-44.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Amsterdam Museum, inv.nr. SA 7278. Knevel, "Armed Citizens", 59-61; see also Maaike Dirkx, "'In all their glory': Amsterdam Civic Guards Portraits – (1) Humble Beginnings", posted on July 13, 2014, https://arthistoriesroom.wordpress.com/2014/07/13/in-all-their-glory-amsterdam-

embraced by an Amsterdam militia group over a century before Rembrandt's *Night Watch*, encapsulates the core virtue of remaining impervious to pleasure and pain, and being unmoved by externalities.

As part of the range of action in the *Night Watch*, the drummer (Jacob Joriszn, 1591- after 1646) and the dog on the right also contribute to the narrative and the moral themes of the picture (see Fig. 1). *The Night Watch* is a noisy painting, including echoes of gunfire and the beating of a drum, the latter part of the apparatus for the marching out of the militiamen. The dog contributes more sound to the gathering by barking or growling at the drummer. Dogs in Western art can represent goodness (hope, faithfulness, attentiveness), but can also connote desire and lower passions. Some dogs in Renaissance and Baroque art lap up blood in a Crucifixion, sniff for spilled food in a dissolute household, or pant after hanging game killed in a hunt. The animal in *The Night Watch* has the least sense of calm and control of any living being in the picture, and stands in sharpest contrast to the stoical captain and lieutenant.



The Night Watch is a study in visual and moral contrasts, and the contradistinctions noted here also extend to the captain and the lieutenant. First, they are clearly in visual contrast to each other, and they differ in action: the captain is dressed in dark clothing, striding more fully, and is speaking and gesturing broadly. The lieutenant is shorter, dressed in yellow garments that are glowing in light, and he is calmly listening rather than gesturing or speaking. Beyond the clear visual differences, Rembrandt created a distinction between the men on a psychological and moral level. One of the chief differences recognized at the time was between the active and contemplative life. This was a long-standing juxtaposition in art and thought, and is highlighted in a work that Rembrandt, as first argued by Jürgen Müller, used as point of departure for his Night Watch, namely, Raphael's School of Athens (Fig. 3), in which Plato stands as the more

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otherworldly, contemplative figure, and Aristotle plays the role of the man of action and of the world.<sup>1</sup> Rembrandt himself suggested a related idea in his aforementioned Aristotle with a Bust of Homer (Fig. 12), with the philosopher shown as a worldly man in luxurious clothing and wearing a gold chain, paired with the bust of Homer, representing quiet literary achievement. Rembrandt regularly designed figures in various kinds of counterplacement and contrast, and in The Night Watch he presents a difference between the posture and gestures of the captain versus those of the lieutenant (Fig. 6). Frans Banning Cocq is a man of action, turning his left leg, speaking, gesturing, and animated of a face. In contrast, Willem van Ruytenburch is completely calm of face, posed nearly in profile, and makes no gesture outward with his hands. His task at this moment is to listen and understand. While we should not think that Rembrandt was heavy-handedly creating an allegory of the active versus the contemplative, he did suggestively weave such a distinction into this complex and lively scene. In discussing individual portraits of the Dutch Golden Age, Ann Jensen Adams, who concluded that "seventeenth-century culture was pervaded and deeply shaped by stoic ideals", noted the convention of representing either a physically immobile sitter with a "neo-Stoic state of tranquillitas", or a more "active portrait" embodying the stoical virtues that lead to personal growth and the acquisition of insight.<sup>2</sup> It is this broad kind of distinction, calculated for the particular context of The Night Watch, that Rembrandt created of the captain and lieutenant.

One might wonder whether Rembrandt was depicting the leading officers on an equal moral footing. Willem was, of course, only second in command and not the leader of the group, and surely many of Rembrandt's contemporaries might for that reason alone have seen him as an inferior to the captain, and thus a lesser presence. Banning Cocq holds the baton of authority in his right hand, and he is initiating the commanding. Comparing their reallife wealth, power, and family status, Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann concluded of Van Ruytenburch that "although very successful, he did not fully measure up to Banning Cocq".<sup>3</sup> But Rembrandt has managed to elevate him by favorably

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Müller, "Rembrandts 'Nachtwache'": 139-156, especially 147-149.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Adams, *Public Faces and Private Identities*, 79 and 86, and 78-112 for the broader discussion.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Haverkamp-Begemann, Rembrandt, 28. For biographical information on Banning Cocq and Van

depicting him with a sense of quiet self-mastery and *sprezzatura*.<sup>1</sup> Beyond the lieutenant's bearing and thoughtful visage, Rembrandt adorned Willem with a bright, glowing yellow garment that immediately seizes our attention and visually and spiritually links him to the bright dress and aura of light around the angelic little girl. The lieutenant actually stands closer than the captain to the emission of the blast itself, and is all the more admirable because of his complete indifference to the sound and smoke. The white feathers and smoke form the effect of a halo over his head. His dress is especially fine in detail, and on his trim he wears St. Andrew's crosses, which form part of the coat of arms of the city of Amsterdam. His pose is of a noble type, with Renaissance-inspired right elbow jutting out in lordly nonchalance, head position nearly in profile, and a classicizing standing/walking pose, all of which give him a timeless look of repose, ease, and dignity. Rembrandt, in his usual sympathetic and insightful way, managed to endow the second-in-command with virtues of inner strength and sophrosyne that give him a moral equality with the vigorous captain.

The architecture serves as an appropriate backdrop for the contradistinction between the militia company leaders. The captain in *The Night Watch* strides out fluidly before the open space suggested by the darkened and undefined archway behind. The lieutenant, in contrast, is anchored by the architecture, and he stands between the viewer and the column in the backdrop. The column strengthens his stance and presence, and underscores his calm and ease. Rubens used a column in a similar way in his *Four Philosophers* to magnify the moral standing of Justus Lipsius (Fig. 9). In addition to any Baroque stylistic motivations, Rembrandt's placement of the officers off-center from the arched open (so different from the central placing of the two protagonists in the *School of Athens*) serves the purpose of distinguishing the typology of the pair, one a man of vigorous action, the other a gentleman of reflection who is graced with bodily stability. The overall architecture unites all of the figures in its breadth and simplicity, and the choice of the unadorned Tuscan order, which was long associated with manliness and strength, underscores the essence of the militia

Ruytenburch, see Dudok van Heel, "Frans Banninck Cocq's Troop", 46-52; see also Colenbrander, "The *Night Watch*", 9-30, for the picture in the context of Banning Cocq's recent promotion to captain. Colenbrander regarded the shooter behind the leader as a sign of the captain's importance. <sup>1</sup> For the courtly bearing of the two leaders, see also the observations in Müller, "Rembrandts 'Nachtwache": 138.

company. The pulvinated frieze here, something normally associated with the Ionic order, adds a touch of elegance, not out of place with the fine costumes and other genteel, elegant trappings. And, as has been noted by more than one writer, the architecture in the background suggests a triumphal arch, and potentially alludes to real celebratory entries as well as to the general idea of triumph and military victory.<sup>1</sup>

Samuel van Hoogstraten, who thought that *The Night Watch* was too dark, did acknowledge that Rembrandt made the group lively and that the work stood out in the Great Hall of the Kloveniersdoelen. Van Hoogstraten accurately predicted that *The Night Watch* would in reputation surpass the companion pieces by other artists and garner the highest admiration in future centuries.<sup>2</sup> At the time of the commission, perhaps no one could have foreseen the bold originality of the composition and the observant representation of varied emotion and action. Still, despite the innovations and unexpected elements, *The Night Watch* is ultimately about what it should be about: likenesses of men, civic duty, the glory of Amsterdam and civic independence in the Dutch Republic, guns and shooting, camaraderie, and brave and virile leadership.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> For triumphal arches and *The Night Watch*, see note 11 above.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Van Hoogstraten, Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilderkonst, 176.

### Illustrations

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Fig. 1: Rembrandt van Rijn, The Night Watch (De Nachtwacht), 1642, oil on canvas, 379 cm by 453.5 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum (on permanent loan from the Amsterdam Museum). Photo: Rijksmuseum.



Fig. 2: Gerrit Lundens (after Rembrandt), The Company of Captain Banning Cocq ("The Nightwatch"), probably between 1642 and 1655, oil on panel, 66.8 cm by 85.4 cm. London, National Gallery (on loan to the Rijksmuseum). Photo: National Gallery.

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*Fig. 3: Raphael*, The School of Athens, 1509-1511, fresco, 500 cm by 770 cm. *Vatican Palace, Vatican Museums, Stanza della Segnatura. Photo: Vatican.* 



Fig. 4: Rembrandt van Rijn, The Blinding of Samson, 1636, oil on canvas, 206 cm by 276 cm. Frankfurt, Städel Museum. Photo: Städel Museum.



*Fig. 5: Rembrandt van Rijn*, Belshazzar's Feast, *c. 1636-1638, oil on canvas, 167.6 cm by 209 cm. London, National Gallery. Photo: National Gallery.* 



 Fig. 8: Bartholomeus van der Helst, Officers and Other Militia Men from District VIII in Amsterdam under the Leadership of Captain Roelof Bicker and Lieutenant Jan Michielz Blaeuw, c. 1640-1643, oil on canvas, 235 cm by 750 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum. Photo: Rijksmuseum.

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Fig. 6: Rembrandt, The Night Watch, detail of Fig. 1 [central section].



Fig. 7: Rembrandt, The Night Watch, detail of Fig. 1 [lower left].



*Fig. 9: Peter Paul Rubens*, The Four Philosophers, 1611, oil on panel, 167 cm by 143 cm. Florence, Galleria Palatina, Pitti Palace. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

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*Fig. 10: Nicolas Poussin*, Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake, *c. 1648, oil on canvas, 118.2 cm by 197.8 cm. London, National Gallery. Photo: National Gallery.* 



Fig. 11: Rembrandt van Rijn, Aristotle with a Bust of Homer, 1653, oil on canvas, 143.5 cm by 136.5 cm. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig. 12: Anonymous (attributed to Cornelis Anthonisz), Rot A of the Kloveniers, 1531, oil on panel, 115 cm by 195 cm. Amsterdam Museum. Photo: Amsterdam Museum.

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Rembrandt, Self-Portrait in a Cap, Wide-Eyed and Open-Mouthed, 1630 (Städel Museum, Frankfurt a.M., https://sammlung.staedelmuseum.de/en/work/self-portrait-in-a-cap)