Rembrandt
Working with Light and Dark
brandt

ster of Light

From the time he was young, 17th-century Dutch painter Rembrandt van Rijn (Rine) wanted to be so famous he would be recognized by his first name only. And, when he painted the self-portrait on our cover, the confident 23-year-old artist was well on his way to accomplishing this goal. Today, nearly 400 years later, Rembrandt’s name is known all over the world. Even his smallest sketch is priceless.

Son of a miller and the eighth of nine children, Rembrandt was born in 1606 in Leiden, a town in northern Holland. At 14, he entered the University of Leiden where he studied Greek, Latin, astrology, and sciences including anatomy and botany. But he stayed only a few months. A document of the time reports that his parents were told, “He shows neither taste nor aptitude for study. His natural bent tends solely to painting and drawing.” So Rembrandt spent the next three years studying with several master artists. He then began painting portraits. In 1631, he moved to Amsterdam—the largest city in the Netherlands, one of the most prosperous countries in Europe. Dutch ships were bringing riches from all over the world, adding to the fortunes of a growing number of merchants. And these wealthy businessmen were interested in acquiring art. Young Rembrandt was one of the most popular and sought-after painters of the time.

Rembrandt is probably best known for the more than 100 insightful self-portraits he painted during his lifetime. He created these works not so much because he wanted to reveal his innermost feelings, but in order to study facial expressions. And his own face was always available. But, like all great portraits, these works communicate the artist’s personality and state of mind. His use of light and shadow is especially expressive. In the early self-portrait on the cover, a young artist at the beginning of his career stares defiantly out at the viewer. The harsh, bright light coming from the left makes his features appear sharp, bold, and determined. In the portrait on the left, a softer, more flattering light bathes a highly successful, richly dressed master painter in his mid-30s. Twenty years later (above), the rich clothing and defiant look are gone. Rembrandt’s composition is very basic. And the elderly painter’s face seems to be lit by a glow from within.

Rembrandt has painted himself at the height of his career. Soft lighting emphasizes each texture and expensive piece of clothing, symbols of the artist’s success.

Self-Portrait, 1660-62. Oil on canvas. 45 7/8" x 37 1/8". The Isabella Stewart, Boston.

Photo: English Heritage Photo Library.

This self-portrait was done toward the end of Rembrandt’s life. The artist wears simple work clothes. And his face and surroundings are illuminated by a golden light.
When you look at Rembrandt’s self-portrait below, do you have much doubt as to his profession? His painter’s easel is backlit and seen in silhouette. It is the largest and most important object in the painting. The long shadow it casts also calls attention to the easel and the mysterious and undoubtedly magnificent work of art it holds.

Rembrandt did this work at the beginning of his career, when he was just starting out. In Italy and other countries, churches and the government provided work for artists by ordering and paying for works of art. But churches in the Netherlands didn’t commission art. Artists depended on wealthy individuals to buy their work. They had to build their reputations by finding ways to draw attention to their art. Rembrandt may have done this self-portrait for himself, or he may have used it to advertise his profession. The artist looks as if he is at work, but he is not wearing working clothes. He is dressed in the kind of formal outfit he might wear to receive clients.

Rembrandt’s clients usually commissioned portraits. But often they ordered paintings of other subjects to decorate their homes. Scholar in an Interior (top right) is not a portrait of a specific person. This shadowy work suggests the isolated, solitary life of the creative person. Two light sources illuminate the two subjects in the picture. This turns the work into an unusual double portrait.

The natural light streaming in from the window on the left highlights the scholar hunched beneath. The flames in the fireplace pick out the form of an old woman on the right. Each seems to be in a separate world. The spiral staircase coming out of the dark interior in the center of the painting divides the work in half. It also makes the scholar’s space look like a strange shell. The composition and lighting in this work communicate the idea of withdrawal into oneself.

In 1634, Rembrandt married a wealthy young woman named Saskia. She also became his favorite model. The next year, the artist bought a large and expensive new house. He set up a studio in an old warehouse, attracted many pupils, and quickly became the most successful artist in Amsterdam. Saskia’s relatives accused Rembrandt of wasting his
inner feelings?

wife's money. So the artist painted a picture (below right), based on a biblical story—"The Prodigal Son." This story is about a spendthrift son who wastes his share of his father's fortune. But in the end, the son returns home and is forgiven.

This work is also a double portrait of Rembrandt and Saskia. In it, the artist raises a glass to his critics. The single source of light coming from the left falls on the picture's multiple focal points—the man's face and hat, his sword (the mark of a gentleman), and the woman's elaborate clothing. This spotlighting effect emphasizes the richness of the couple's surroundings and way of life.

In the unusual double portrait above, each figure is illuminated by a separate light source.

TOP RIGHT: Scholar in an Interior, 1635. Oil on canvas. 11" x 12". Louvre, Paris.

Rembrandt painted this picture of his wife and himself to strike back at his critics. He has included an expensive "peacock pie" (on Saskia's left) to show the world how wealthy they are.

Painting Groups

How important is light in these two works?

During the 17th century, many political groups and other organizations in the Netherlands wanted pictures of themselves. Since there were no cameras, Dutch painters were the ones who supplied these large group portraits. In 1632, Rembrandt received his first important commission. He was to paint a portrait of a well-known doctor giving an anatomy lesson to an equally well-known group of men. The picture would hang in one of the guild halls in Amsterdam. There it would be seen by many people and bring in a great deal of new business. Rembrandt was eager to show everyone what he could do.

The men watching the surgeon, Professor Nicolaas Tulp (see pages 8-9) are not doctors. They may be politicians, since the man in the center holds a list of government officials. (The corpse is that of a recently executed criminal.) Since group portraits of the time were usually stiff, formal, and posed, Rembrandt decided to show this lecture as a dramatic event. He used bright light to spotlight the doctor, grouped all the men on the left, and painted them bending forward with amazed expressions. Even though this early work has flaws—some of the men look posed and Dr. Tulp appears a little stiff—The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp was a great success.

During the next few years, Rembrandt's fame grew. In 1641, he was hired by the local civic guard to paint a portrait of their group. Once again, the artist didn't paint a row of faces. He presented the guardsmen as characters in a human drama. He shows the military company as they might have looked marching into battle. Rembrandt's selective spotlighting of certain figures makes the scene appear as chaotic as it probably would have been in real life. The captain in front seems to be giving a speech, while everyone...

In paintings like this one, done toward the end of his life, Rembrandt's subjects appear to be illuminated by a golden inner glow.

*Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph, 1656, oil, 92 1/4" x 92 7/16". Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Gemäldegalerie, Alte Meister, Kassel.*
behind him moves off in a different direction. And Rembrandt has added some strange touches of his own. Can you find a little girl, a dog, and a running boy? The picture’s light source changes throughout the picture. Sometimes it comes from the left, then from the right, adding to the feeling of energy and chaos. Over the years, the painting darkened considerably. So eventually this work came to be known as The Night Watch.

At the end of 1642, Rembrandt’s luck ran out. Saskia died, leaving him to take care of their young son, Titus. She also left the remainder of her fortune to Titus. Rembrandt hired a young woman, Hendrickje, to look after his son. This created a scandal, causing the artist to lose business. Rembrandt’s portraits no longer flattered his sitters; few clients wanted to see their true nature reflected on canvas. The artist had less and less business, but continued to buy expensive props, clothing, and objects to use in his paintings.

Rembrandt kept on spending money and fell into debt. In 1656, his house and all his possessions were sold to pay what he owed. He lived very simply, got a few commissions, and kept on working. Toward the end of his life, the artist did a number of paintings based on biblical stories such as the one on the opposite page. In this work, Jacob—a biblical Hebrew leader—is shown on his deathbed, blessing his grandson. A spiritual light streams in on the old man, who shares this heavenly illumination with his family. In 1669, some years after painting this work, Rembrandt died at the age of 63.
Rembrandt's The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp

"The psychological truth in Rembrandt's paintings goes beyond that of any other artist who has ever lived."
— Kenneth Clark, art historian
Illuminating Personalities
Three artists who work with light and shadow.

Timeless Images

How does this photo of contemporary teenagers relate to the paintings done by Rembrandt nearly four centuries ago? And why has African-American photographer Dawoud Bey taken two similar photos and put them side by side?

Dawoud Bey, who has been making portraits for 25 years, wants “to bring people of color out of the background of American life.” He feels that a portrait is a collaboration between photographer and subject. By working with a 235-pound, five-foot-high Polaroid, Bey creates large, minutely detailed images. Because of his camera’s size and the length of time a portrait takes, the artist can get to know his subjects and gain insight into their personalities.

Compare Horace and Shomari with some of Rembrandt’s portraits. The subjects in both artists’ works stare confidently out at the viewer. The dark, neutral settings, formal poses, inclusion of detail, and rich play of light on the skin tones are very similar. Bey’s use of multiple images expresses the many sides of each individual. There are only two figures in the photo above. But the artist has created the impression of a third person made up of fragments of both. Could Bey be suggesting how alike these two are or, perhaps, how each influences the other.

“I want these photos to suggest that there is no one way to view a person.”
—Dawoud Bey
A New Old Master

In some ways, contemporary Norwegian painter Odd (Ode) Nerdrum exists in Rembrandt’s 17th century. He lives in self-imposed isolation, mixes and grinds his own paints, and stretches his own canvases. He never paints from photos, only from models who pose for his pictures. Nerdrum’s highly realistic scenes and classically arranged compositions bathed in golden light might have been painted 400 years ago.

The painter uses several devices to produce the depth and reality he has achieved in works like The Water Protectors (above). The figures are foreshortened (their shoulders and arms seem to project toward the viewer). Their highlighted bodies emerge from deeply shaded areas. Cast shadows add to the sense of mystery.

At first glance, this work looks as if it could have been painted in another era. What clues give you the idea that this may not be the case? The figures are dressed in animal skins and cloaks from long ago. But they carry very modern guns. The hats are skins, but they also resemble pilots’ helmets. The distant coastline is silent, desolate, and desolate. Nerdrum’s paintings suggest a wasted landscape in which civilization has gone to pieces. Like Rembrandt, Nerdrum has developed a painting style that enables him to create his own unique, imaginary world.

More Dutch Portraits

At the same time that Rembrandt was making his reputation in Amsterdam, just a few miles away another Dutch artist was also beginning her career. Forced to support herself after her father declared bankruptcy, 15-year-old Judith Leyster took up painting. Leyster was so talented that she was one of the few women allowed to join the artists’ guild in her town. (A guild was like an artists’ union.) And she was, perhaps, the only woman successful enough to have a workshop with male students.

Like Rembrandt and many Dutch artists of the time, Leyster was very interested in depicting the effects of light and shadow. The face in one of her most important works, The Flute Player (left), is dramatically highlighted on one side. The figure and the violin on the wall cast long diagonal shadows echoing the diagonal of the flute.

Leyster’s artistic production fell off after her marriage and the birth of the first of her five children. After her death in 1660, most of her paintings were credited to several famous male artists. At the end of the 19th century, Leyster’s signature was discovered on one of her paintings. Her reputation was revived, and Judith Leyster is now regarded as an important 17th-century Dutch artist.
Artwork by Lamont Russ

Working with Light and Shadow

Nineteen-year-old Lamont Russ created this dramatic work of art (right) to express how he felt about a problem he was having. The drawing not only helped him solve the problem. It won a national art award. Currently a freshman at the Atlanta College of Art, Lamont did this work while attending GIBBS-Pinellas County Center for the Arts in St. Petersburg, Florida. At this point, he’s considering a number of art careers. But there’s one thing he is certain of, “Art is definitely what I want to do with my life.”

Do your drawings often surprise you?
That happens a lot. That’s because I don’t do normal traditional portraits of people. I want to do more than just draw a face looking at you. That’s boring.

Why don’t you like traditional portraits?
There’s no feeling to them. It doesn’t move me to look at a person sitting there, smiling. You can snap a photo to get that. I want to have some sort of emotional quality in my pictures. I also want to let the viewer figure out what’s going on in the picture. I want them to have to figure things out for themselves by looking at the backgrounds, the faces, the objects hidden in the shadows. My portraits contain realistic objects, but there are always surrealistic elements.

Can you discuss how you use highlights and shadows?
I often use them to help show emotion. Working at night and setting up your own lights makes it possible to create a wide range of values. Setting this scene at night gave me that feeling of a dark, mysterious past that I was looking for. The problem between my friend and me was about communication. That’s why my mouth is darkened...
"I wanted the elements in the picture, like the hands, the lighting, the hidden face, the shadow over the mouth, to suggest the story."

out. The eyes help tell the story too. Most of the picture is dark, so I used highlights to draw the viewer's attention to my eyes. The light shining on my face represents innocence. In this situation, no one is to blame.

How did you actually create this piece?
I outlined myself on the right. I put in my eyes first. I was thinking about our problem, and how I could express it in the picture. I didn't want the story to be obvious. I wanted the elements in the picture—like the hands, the lighting, the hidden face, the shadow over the mouth—to suggest the story. Almost like a metaphor type thing.

Then what did you do?
I did my face next. I drew the mouth, then got the idea of putting it in shadow. The beat-up clothing I'm wearing represents some guilt on my part for waiting so long to call her. For not doing something sooner. I placed my friend's face behind my shoulder, but she didn't look too friendly like that. I wanted to create a connection between us, so I added her hand. The clasped hands indicate that there is still a friendship there. Even if, right now, there's a problem. It was a hopeful gesture.

Is the background part of the story?
It's my old house. I put the people in there to represent the world. They watch in silence. There's a guy sitting in a chair and there's a little kid playing on the ground. They represent the part of the world that hears or knows what's going on, but really doesn't care. It's not affecting them.

Do you like working in pencil?
Yeah, I do. But I only like it for certain pictures, usually the ones that involve emotions or a situation in my life that actually occurred. Using a pencil makes it more realistic for me. Now I'm starting to work with oil sticks. They're like frozen oil paint; actually paint in the form of a pencil.

Do you have any advice for aspiring artists like yourself?
If you love doing art, just keep doing it. There are going to be a lot of obstacles. There are going to be a lot of problems that will make you want to stop or give up. But if you really love it, don't stop. A couple of friends of mine in high school loved drawing, but they gave it up when they realized the work that was involved. If you love art, trust me, the work will be worth it.
Rembrandt is known for the mysterious effects of light and shadow that he created in his paintings and prints. He did hundreds of portraits, both individual and group, in addition to many self-portraits. And it was largely through his dramatic use of light and dark that the artist was able to so effectively communicate his subjects’ moods and emotions.

In this workshop, you’ll be using light and shadow to create a unique kind of “double portrait.”

**MATERIALS**
- Hi-Fi Grays: 12 assorted gray pastels
- Earth Tones: 12 assorted earth-tone pastels (OR you can use white, black, brown, and sepia pastels)
- 18" x 24" 80lb Manila paper
- Drawing board
- Paper toweling

To create strong highlights, shadows, and cast shadows, establish distinct foreground, middleground, and background areas. You might consider using costumes or layers of contemporary clothing with a hanging cloth background. You might wish to practice several contour, blind contour, and gesture drawings before beginning this workshop. You can also practice pastel blending techniques. Blending, not outlining, emphasizes three-dimensional qualities.

**STEP 1**
Set up a model on a raised platform so the entire class can see him or her. Plan two separate poses, one standing and one sitting. Consider only poses that the model is able to hold for 20 minutes. Use floodlights

**STEP 2**
Since the finished drawing will be a double portrait, you will need to plan your composition before starting to draw. Once you have
Use highlights and shading to create an inventive double portrait.

determined your final arrangement, you might wish to block in your first figure drawing. Place it slightly to the right or left of the center of the paper. The portrait may be full figure, partial, face/shoulder, or a combination. The model can be seen from the front and/or facing right or left. Draw the large forms or masses first; use only contours that are essential to define the figure. **Squinting at the figure will help isolate the light and dark areas.**

**STEP 3**
Now arrange the model in a second pose that contrasts with the first pose. Begin to draw the second portrait; it should relate to the first. Figures can overlap or merge together. Start with light-gray pastels and work toward darker shades. Avoid too much detail. Keep referring to the model when drawing. Begin to incorporate earth tones, but only as an accent. **Do not oversea earth tones.** Decide how to handle background areas to enhance composition or link figures. **Negative space** (background) should not detract from **positive space** (figures).

**SOME SOLUTIONS**
When you plan your composition, will one of your figures overlap the other, or will the two figures blend together? Will your composition be **symmetrical** (the same on both sides) or **asymmetrical** (different on each side but visually balanced)? Will you include two full figures or **part of each one**? How will you use light and shadow to bring the viewer's eye to your **focal point(s)**? Will you **highlight**, use **spotlighting**, or **backlight** your figures? How can you use **background lighting** to draw attention to the faces or figures in your drawing? How might you use **cast shadows** to emphasize your focal point(s)? Will you showcase both faces/figures, or just one?
Rembrandt and the other artists whose work is featured in this issue used light and dark to heighten the emotional power of their paintings. Can you identify these faces, the artists who created them, and the techniques these artists used?

1. Each of the people above is featured in this issue. Write in the letter of the face that is best described by the name or identification below. (Some names may have a number of answers.)
   
a. Dr. Tulp
b. A scholar
c. An artist
d. Judith Leyster
e. Jacob
f. A water protector
g. Rembrandt
h. A captain of the guard
i. Odd Nerdrum
j. A musician

2. Write in the letter of the face that most closely illustrates the following lighting techniques. (Some techniques can be applied to several of the faces.)
   
k. Natural light
l. Soft, flattering light
m. Harsh, bright light
n. Inner glow
o. Spotlighting
p. Spiritual light
q. Cast shadows
r. Dramatic sidelighting
s. Selective spotlighting