

Rembrandt and the epiphany of the face

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I. The truth about the face

Oh God, why is there no mark upon men's bodies, by which we could know the true ones from the false?

*Euripides*¹

We know from works of the visual arts that the human face, when presented to us in certain ways, elicits a strong sense of inwardness, as if behind the painted image the whole depth and experience of a human subject lie hidden. In the past, the interpretation and celebration of this inwardness was a mainstay of art historical writing. Discerning a painting's meaning often meant regarding the face or faces it represented as texts that, when properly deciphered, could disclose not only the character and biography of the represented subjects, but also the artist's own most personal feelings and intentions. Walter Pater's *Gioconda* is only an extreme example of how ephrastic discourse could flourish when submitted to the equivocality of the face. Today we have less confidence in the activity of reading a face. Like so many other forms of subjective "presence," the message of the face has rightly become the focus of a strong and ongoing deconstruction.² And yet the irreducible and continuing capacity of the represented face to affect us as interiority remains largely elusive. We know little about the function that such felt inwardness serves within specific works of art, or about the history of this inwardness—its invention, so to speak, within the Western pictorial tradition. What kind of thing, then, is the face? And what truth can its representation in art mediate to us, its interpreters?

An illustration from Paul Bouts's *La Psychognomie* (fig. 1),³ a book of practical physiognomy for "educators and managers" published in 1930, asserts that faces are readable enough. The "deux types bien tranchés" that face us from the page serve not only as models through which we may distinguish the contemplative character from the active, the spiritual from the material. In their immediate recognizability as types, the two faces also seem both to support and to

interpret the claims of physiognomy; for since Democritus, physiognomy as a field of inquiry has been grounded in the belief that human character (*ethos*) is revealed in the outward appearances (*eidōs*) of the face and body.⁴ Physiognomy thus situates itself between the very two terms of *esprit* and *matière* represented in Bouts's illustration. The spiritual man is recognized as such through his material form; and the material man, becoming transparent or readable in proportion to how thick-skinned and hard-skulled he is, reveals the character of his spirit despite himself. Bouts invites us to examine the two figures "en detail," to observe all the particular signs that render these faces readable and that articulate their antitheses. A close reading of the picture, however, suggests that the terms that seem to be held in such clear opposition to one another and implicitly validate the claims of physiognomy are, finally, deeply vexed ones.

On one level, the relation between spirit and matter is sustained in this illustration through the juxtaposition of text and image. What each character thinks—or better, the character of his thoughts as he would think them—is literally written on his brow. Structured like an emblem, Bouts's figures combine picture and writing, face and meaning, as if in a physiognomist's dream. Yet how stable are these distinctions? For one thing, the writing that should reveal unequivocally the "hidden" thought of the characters fashions its own secrets. The spiritual type thinks, "Je suis certain que l'homme est esprit," exemplifying in his syntax the primacy he gives to subjectivity, to the "I am," whereas the materialist thinks in accordance with his faith in the primacy of the thing: "Quelque chose me dit que l'homme est matière." Thus written inscriptions present themselves to us with their own revealing physiognomies, that is, as things that demand and sustain further interpretation if they are fully to reveal character. Conversely, the faces of the two men are not clearly distinguishable from the order of written inscription. Like writing, they are the sum of visual signs, of conventions whose meaning is accessible only to those who share or can read the signs of that

1. *Medea*, ll. 516–519; trans. Rex Warner (Chicago: 1955).

2. See, for example, Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: 1978), 79–153.

3. Paul Bouts, *La Psychognomie* (Paris: 1931), 28.

4. See Frag. 61. For a history of classical physiognomy, see August Pauly and Georg Wissowa, *Real-Encyclopädie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft*, ed. Wilhelm Kröllt (Stuttgart: 1916), 46: 1064–1073.

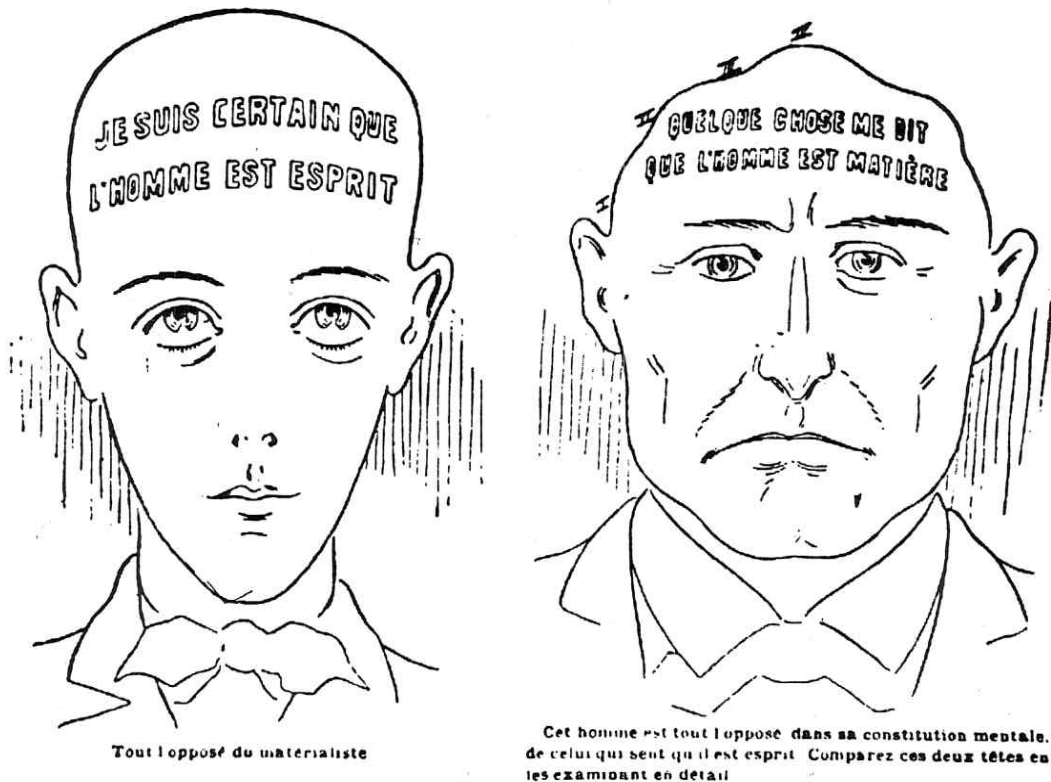


Figure 1. Paul Bouts, illustration from *La Psychognomie* (Paris: 1930).

particular culture. Bouts renders the spiritual type with large, "soulful" eyes, delicate lips, a radically diminished nose, and a graceful oval face untouched by blemishes or imperfections. The "réaliste actif" has coarse, broad features; his face reveals its heightened materiality by the presence of pen lines indicating furrows and folds. Whereas in the figure of the "contemplatif affectif" the line had been limited to indicating the essential features and contours of the face, here it must do double duty, articulating as well the flesh's very volumetricity; the material/spiritual distinction thus plays through to the order of the graphic mark itself.

Now the opposition of material and spiritual is far from value-free. The materialist's low forehead, marked with four totally unexplained Roman numerals (signs, in any event, that this skull is of scientific curiosity), suggests not only his insensitivity to things spiritual due to a lesser brain capacity, but also his proximity to the animal or criminal. Needless to say, the discourses that implicitly inform Bouts's opposition of physiognomies—for example, holiness versus animality/profanity,

beauty versus ugliness,⁵ femininity versus masculinity, good versus evil—cannot account for anything like an essential character behind all written and cultural signs. Representing rather a deployment of social stereotypes and visual conventions, these faces do not reveal the character of the men depicted, but express the culture that depicts them. For example, the eyes of the "contemplatif affectif," turned heavenward, can be read as spiritual only within a culture or an iconographic tradition that locates the divine in heaven.

One of the strangest fictions about Bouts's illustration is the quality of those upturned eyes. The essential problem facing the illustrator is how to represent thought or inwardness in a readable fashion. In Bouts,

5. That ugliness should be associated with materiality can be properly understood only if we see Bouts's text for what it is—a product of racist or anti-Semitic literature of the thirties. See Marie-José Baudinet and Michel Indergand, "Lecture raciste du visage: Quelques notes sur Narcisse Horrifé," in *Du Visage*, ed. Baudinet and Christian Schlatter (Lille: 1982), 67–90. The opposition of spiritual and material types is not a symmetry in Bouts. The spiritual type is marked with a plus (+) and his features are regarded as characteristically ennobling.

the spiritual man not only directs his gaze heavenward; he also appears to lift his eyes toward the inscription on his brow. The paradoxes of this conceit are worth noting. For one thing, the written words, arranged in a gentle curve, seem to adhere to the material surface of the forehead. The content of thought has thus been absurdly externalized, displaced on the outward contour of the flesh. Moreover, this transformation of thought into writing represents a curious reversal of the relation between face and text. Instead of being the object of interpretive attention, the visible container of a hidden interiority, the face now derives its meaning from its own attention to the very texts that should interpret it. By losing itself in its own thoughts, as it were, the face can no longer serve as the subject of, but only as the mirror for, the physiognomist forever in search of readable things. Bouts attempts to frame the face, to assert its primacy and centrality over and against its interpretations, by providing labels beneath each figure and another label beneath the whole illustration. All that this proliferation of texts can frame, however, is the loss of the face to texts about the face.

Bouts's *Psychognomie*, comical in its patent reductiveness, is nevertheless instructive, for it amplifies problems inherent in any study of the face. It alerts us, above all, to the way the face's authority, its freedom of speech, as it were, can disappear when submitted to interpretation. This should caution us against an art historical discourse that seeks to get at the face's essential interiority simply by identifying the character of its thoughts. Furthermore, the *Psychognomie*'s bold assertion of fact, coupled with its bare-faced fictionality, is indicative of an enduring characteristic of the study of the face: its perennial status as pseudoscience. Bouts conjures up a laboratory atmosphere also in his illustrations by depicting his types with shaved heads, indicative of their status either as specimens or as diagrams, even as he includes certain anecdotal details (like the dandyish bow tie on the "contemplatif-affectif") that are not quite in keeping with the aura of science. This doomed appeal to the scientific is not unique to Bouts, for throughout its long history, physiognomy as a branch of learning always seems to aspire to a place among the proper sciences. That its efforts in this regard have also invariably failed, that it is condemned to hover uncomfortably between fact and fiction, is perhaps a result of the nature of physiognomy: for in the deepest sense, neither lies nor truths can be said about the face. Those very categories

presuppose the authenticity of the face, the epiphany of the Other in the world.⁶

It is appropriate, therefore, that the primary text on physiognomy from antiquity should be in the Pseudo-Aristotle, as if this attribution were itself expressive of how the study of the face always borders on, but is never admitted to, the legitimate canons of knowledge and "certainty." In the *Physignomonika*, the Aristotelian method of creating distinct categories and discerning the interconnections between matter and form, body and soul, is applied to an object (the readable face or body) that fails to yield a coherent discourse. Physiognomy for the Pseudo-Aristotle works essentially on a system of analogies or correspondences: because the nature of the soul is always reflected in the outward form of the body, and because certain animals and races have characteristics that we know, the unknown disposition of any person can be discerned by finding his or her corresponding body type in a being whose character we do know. Behind this hermeneutic lies the basic Aristotelian assumption that, just as there is no absolute separation between the idea and the appearance, so too the higher and the lower, the human and the animal are joined by a single continuum of activity and development. To approach something unknown (in the case of physiognomy, the character of a person), we must descend to its corresponding term in the known. Thus, for example, a person who looks like a dog will be said to share the dog's fundamental and well-recognized disposition: spitefulness. What is most striking in this method is less the discovery of analogies than the belief that the characters of certain "lower" creatures are indeed unequivocally known. In a sense, the more unknown

6. Here and throughout this essay, my language is informed by the work of Emmanuel Levinas, for whom the face is the central philosophic thematic. In *Totality and Infinity* he writes: "Expression does not consist of giving us the Other's interiority. The Other who expresses himself precisely does not give himself, and accordingly retains the freedom to lie. But deceit and veracity already presuppose the absolute authority of the face—the privileged case of a presentation of being foreign to the alternative of truth and non-truth, circumventing the ambiguity of the true and false which every truth risks—an ambiguity, moreover, in which all values move" (trans. Alphonso Lingas [Pittsburgh: 1969], 202). A reading of the face as somehow prior to the categories of fact and fiction that inform science could just as well be worked out through the psychoanalytic perspective of Jacques Lacan or Melanie Klein. Since it is the mother's face, mirroring and commanding the infant, that enables the advent of the self, the face retains a primacy and therefore an autonomy vis-à-vis the order of reason.

the character of a being really is, and therefore the more open it is to fictions about its character that can be neither proven nor denied (e.g., the seeming self-evident fact that dogs are spiteful), the better it is suited to act as an interpretive key for beings whose disposition is more accessible. The method of analogies becomes finally a vicious circle in which attributions of character are based on prior, untested misreadings, and in which the face, separated from the being who bears it, circulates in systems of unexplained resemblance.

And yet, the Pseudo-Aristotelian study of physiognomonics enjoyed a high reputation throughout the Renaissance. From Giovanni Battista della Porta's *Della Fisionomia dell'Uomo* and Pomponius Gauricus's *De sculptura* to the physiognomic theories of Le Brun and Lavater, human character has been interpreted through the discovery and taxonomy of animal resemblances. In an illustration from Charles Le Brun's physiognomic studies, views of a cow's head are juxtaposed with the faces of bovine men (fig. 2).⁷ In order to sustain the interpretive analogy, the artist had to endow the cow with a distinctly human look, while so distorting the faces of the men that they seem more animal than human. Most striking in this regard are those glassy, bulbous eyes, which are rendered sightless by the heavy highlights that obscure the pupils, thereby denying us any subjective access to or reciprocity with the represented face. In that blank stare we can discern the futility of the operation of traditional physiognomy. What distinguishes the face from all other objects, and what gives it that sense of "depth" that can elicit interpretation in the first place, is its singular ability to make the human subject as *subject* visible in the world. Since, therefore, the fundamental quality of this subjective depth is its inaccessibility, the attempt to classify or objectify its character will be doomed from the start. Bouts and Le Brun represent versions of this error, for in each the fundamental depth of the face is replaced by a legible surface: the written text or the glassy exterior of the eye. These two failed versions of physiognomy can serve a negative function within our understanding of the face. By revealing how the truth about the face can be lost when it is submitted to a certain kind of study, they can alert us to the status of the inwardness that another student of the face,

7. The illustration is from a dissertation delivered by Le Brun before the Academy of Painters and Sculptors; the text of the dissertation itself is lost. For a discussion of the significance of Le Brun's study of the face, see Norman Bryson, *Word and Image* (Cambridge: 1981), 44–49.

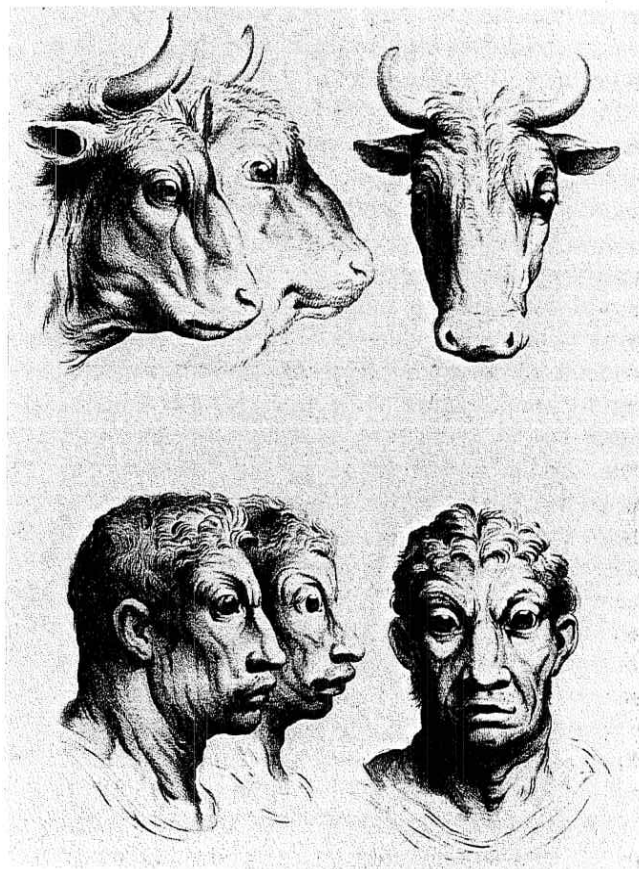


Figure 2. Charles Le Brun, *Physiognomic Studies*, ca. 1665.

Rembrandt van Rijn, does everything in his power to preserve.

Before examining how the epiphany of the face operates in Rembrandt, it is useful to examine an alternative account of physiognomy, one that comes closer to the practices and concerns of artists themselves. In the *Trattato*, Leonardo da Vinci rejects the "false physiognomy"⁸ of Pseudo-Aristotle and his Renaissance imitators, proposing an alternative approach to the face. What determines the "character" of the face is not its bony structure and its resemblance to the faces of animals, but rather the muscular traces of frequent expression. Leonardo writes, for example, that "those who have horizontal lines strongly marked on their foreheads are men full of concealed or public

8. Leonardo da Vinci, *Treatise on Painting*, trans. and ed. A. Philip McMahon (Princeton: 1956), 157. See also E. H. Gombrich, "The Grotesque Heads," in *The Heritage of Apelles* (Ithaca: 1976), 59–62.

lamentation."⁹ Leonardo thus transforms the face from a fixed sign for the character of its wearer to a living and active vehicle for the expression of human emotions. In a sense, he introduces into physiognomy the element of time: the character, the truth about the face, is expressed in the movements of the face. And even when it is not animated by emotion, the face preserves the history of an individual's passions in the residual lines and creases that expression leaves behind. Ernst Kris, in an essay on the "character heads" of Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, has attributed to the influence of Leonardo some of the mannerist passion for observing, representing, and cataloging distinct facial expressions.¹⁰ Even closer to Leonardo's notion of physiognomy as the residue of expression, however, is the Dutch fascination with the faces of elderly people. The studies of old men and women by Jacques De Gheyn II and Rembrandt, for instance, seem to celebrate the folds and distortion of the aged human face: while the sitter is usually represented in a contemplative or restful pose, his or her tortured features bespeak a history and therefore a depth of experience beyond any sign of a particular emotion.¹¹ What, though, renders the face's lines and signs legible?

While stressing the importance of observation in acquiring a proper vocabulary of physiognomies, Leonardo recognizes that pictorial representation cannot always capture unambiguously the expressive movements of the face. It is thus necessary for him to lay down rules or conventions for rendering certain emotions. Turning to the difficult distinction between representations of laughing and weeping, which had already troubled Alberti,¹² Leonardo legislates the proper pictorial conventions for these emotions. "Between one who laughs and one who weeps," he writes, "there is no difference in the eyes, or mouth, or cheeks, but only in the rigidity of the eyebrows which are drawn together by him who weeps and are raised by him who laughs."¹³ Here again, as in Bouts and Le

Brun, for the face to be readable it must renounce its freedom of speech and be reduced to a nonambiguous sign.

The discipline of art history tends to display an uneasiness about precisely this problem: whether the face is a natural expression of real, inner emotion, or whether it is what E. H. Gombrich calls a symbol,¹⁴ a visual convention within a particular pictorial tradition. Clearly, this uncertainty is bound up with the nature of the material. As we have seen throughout our brief account of physiognomy, terms like *natural* and *conventional*, *inner* and *outer*, *material* and *spiritual* lose their stability when submitted to the epiphany of the face. Fritz Saxl, in a paper on gesture and physiognomy in the visual arts, proposed that the study of the history of art could offer a useful perspective on the general problem of the naturalness of bodily expression:

Because it forces us to recognize the degree to which individual formulations of gesture and facial expression are determined by well-established conventions, historical analysis makes us skeptical about the whole enterprise of reading inner life from the outer appearance of things. That is, it cautions us against positing subjective consciousness from the evidence of objective representation. It is not the free, unmediated expression of inner life which determines artistic formulations of gesture and the face, but rather the generative dialogue with already established pictorial forms and conventions.¹⁵

In this statement made to a group of professional psychologists Saxl chooses to conflate two very different orders of natural expression: on the one hand, the way a represented subject can give off an uncanny aura of private character or interiority that makes us forget its status as mere visual sign; on the other, the artist's own self-expression, which seems sometimes to fashion images and forms without recourse to any established vocabulary. Leaving aside the meaning of this conflation, we can see how, according to Saxl, both these versions of expression undergo a significant demystification when they are approached through historical analysis. For the study of art history as *history*

9. *Ibid.*, 157.

10. Ernst Kris, "Die Charakterköpfe des Franz Xaver Messerschmidt," *Jahrbuch der kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien*, n.s. 6 (1932), 194–200.

11. Something of this attitude is surely present in Rembrandt's late self-portraits, in which the artist's unrelenting attention to the signs of age replaces the exaggerated facial expressions of the early sketched or etched self-portrait *tronies*.

12. See Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. John R. Spence (New Haven: 1966), 77–78.

13. Leonardo, *Treatise on Painting*, 155.

14. E. H. Gombrich, following Fritz Saxl, distinguishes between symptom and symbol in his discussion of the role of convention in the representation of gesture. See his "Ritualized Gesture and Expression in Art," in *The Image and the Eye* (Cornell: 1982), 63–65.

15. Fritz Saxl, "Die Ausdrucksgebärden der bildenden Kunst," in *Bericht über den XII. Kongreß der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Psychologie in Hamburg von 12.–16. April 1931* (Jena: 1932), 25; trans. my own.

tends to argue in favor of the force of convention in determining both the creation and the reception of the visual image. It is understandable, from this perspective, why most recent accounts of expressive physiognomy focus almost exclusively on the history of caricature.¹⁶ For as a means of getting at the face, the study of caricature reveals the face's legibility to be founded on the manipulation of abstract signs and conventions that lay no claims to any real interiority. Saxl's stress on the shaping function of convention is not without its problems, however, when it is applied to other aspects of visual representation. For one thing, while "historical analysis" may indeed discover a continuity of pictorial forms in the visual arts, it can also conceal a very real element in the beholder's immediate response to the work of art—that obscure but irreducible sense that the self present to us in, say, a portrait is not just the effective sum of certain visual conventions, each with its own history, but rather is available to us immediately and synthetically, as it were, within the pure present of our viewing experience. More important, however, Saxl's account makes it extremely difficult to analyse an art that has expressly the goal of "positing subjective consciousness from the outward appearance of things."

In *Das holländische Gruppenporträt*, Alois Riegl interprets the art of Rembrandt as the culmination of just such a tradition, one whose goal was the representation of the inner subjective life of individuals. Dutch painting, according to Riegl, was essentially an art of interiority; its real "object" was the immaterial presence of *Gemüt* (character), particularly as it revealed itself obliquely, through suggestion or intimation, in the features of the represented face.¹⁷ By tracing the development of group portraiture in Holland from the early sixteenth century to the time of Rembrandt, Riegl isolates and analyses various specific devices used by painters to convey this sense of inwardness in their subjects. For example, instead of uniting the elements of a picture around a single, commanding human action to which all figures, gestures, and compositional features are subordinated (the mode of Italian history painting), the Dutch artist

16. See, for example, E. H. Gombrich's chapter "The Experiment of Caricature," in *Art and Illusion*, 2d rev. ed. (Princeton: 1961), 330–358.

17. Alois Riegl, *Das holländische Gruppenporträt* (Vienna: 1931), 1: 19. For a clear account of Riegl's significance to the study of art history see Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art* (New Haven: 1982), 71–97. I am grateful to Svetlana Alpers for directing me to Riegl's seminal account.

will deliberately disrupt the internal narrative coherence of his picture so as to create a distance between thought and action. In Dirk Jacobsz.'s *Militia Company* from 1529 (fig. 3), to name one of Riegl's examples, the hands of the sitters gesture variously toward the group's captain, thus suggesting a center of organization within the painted world. The faces in the picture, on the other hand, each rendered carefully as an individual portrait likeness, have a different point of focus: gazing out of the painting, they single out us, the spectators of the scene, and set us up as an alternative and external organizing center.¹⁸ This peculiar disjunction between active hand gestures and passive or contemplative facial expression has important effects on our experience of the visual image. For one thing, it conveys a sense of something separate from or hidden behind the overt events of the world. Thus, while the outward gazes of the sitters may disturb the unity of the image as it would be understood by Italian history painting, they also institute a special kind of coherence peculiar to painting in the North: the coherence of an authentic and autonomous subjectivity that runs through the sitters and unites them with ourselves.

This inwardness is inscribed most clearly within the sitters' individual physiognomies. In the way Jacobsz.'s militia men regard us, in the way they receive us with their gaze while refusing to lose themselves in the act of looking, Riegl finds his primary evidence for the quality of *Aufmerksamkeit* (attentiveness) in the represented face. *Aufmerksamkeit*, according to Riegl, is "the most subjective of all expressions of inner life"¹⁹ and represents the most important invention of Dutch group portraiture. What makes *Aufmerksamkeit* a repository of inwardness is not only its ability to suggest a self behind or beyond the face's gaze, but also the important way it implicates in its message the subjective life of the painting's spectator. Viewing the faces of Jacobsz.'s militia men with the sensitivity they deserve demands a "more intimate kind of looking, one which is unique to Northern art."²⁰ It demands, that is, that we ourselves become attentive to something not visibly present in the picture (e.g., a sitter's thoughts, the effect of a verbal command as it is heard and understood throughout the represented group, or the presence of an object of the sitter's attention outside of the painting's represented space). In a painting like Jacobsz.'s, the focus on the spectator becomes quite

18. Riegl, *ibid.*, 41–43.

19. *Ibid.*, 19; trans. my own.

20. *Ibid.*, 13; trans. my own.



Figure 3. Dirk Jacobsz., *Militia Company*, 1529. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

literal, for by directing their eyes at us, the sitters together institute our gaze as the painted world's essential principle of organization. Dutch group portraiture thus becomes, in Riegl's analysis, a dialogue of face with face, its essential terms being, on the one hand, the expressive physiognomies of the sitters, and, on the other, the object of their *Aufmerksamkeit*: the constitutive gaze of the viewing subject.

This is not the place for a full account of how Riegl positions Rembrandt at the culmination of this native Dutch tradition. Suffice it to say that although Rembrandt succeeds in unifying his paintings around the representation of a single, commanding human action to which all pictorial elements are subordinated, he does so only in order to fulfill the essentially Dutch aim of his art: that is, the representation of the inner life of his subjects. In a painting like *The Syndics* (fig. 4), Riegl discovers two distinct centers of *Aufmerksamkeit*: on the one hand, the sitter's postures and gestures organize the scene around the dramatic event of the leader reading from a book of rules; on the other hand, their gaze, fixed on something outside of the painted

world but within the space of the viewer, suggests that their attention has been distracted by an intrusion from without. Rembrandt thus invents, in a sense, a kind of plot in which the essential *Aufmerksamkeit* of the represented group can appear as a natural result of a single—if complex—drama whose players include both the sitters and the spectators. That is, he naturalizes the rift between gesture and face (and, implicitly, between history painting and group portraiture), thereby intensifying the authenticity of the inwardness that is felt in the sitters' physiognomies.

Although we may not agree with all the particulars of his argument, Riegl provides us with a powerful and dialectical account of the way the representation of the face can be put to use in fashioning an art of inwardness. The brilliance of *Das holländische Gruppenporträt* lies finally less in its central thesis of a "subjective" mode of representation peculiar to the Dutch than in the style and strategy of his discourse. By careful description of how certain paintings structure the viewer's experience and interpretation, Riegl can account, quite specifically, for the ways in which the



Figure 4. Rembrandt, *The Syndics*, 1662. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

human inwardness that is conveyed by the represented face can affect all aspects of our viewing of the image, from our appreciation of its narrative, symbolic, and compositional dimensions to the nature of our own subjective response itself.²¹ Riegl describes, for example, the viewing of a Rembrandt as, in essence, "a formidable psychological enquiry into the physiognomic expressions of the individual sitters" in which "the exterior, objective coherency of the scene is transformed into

21. We need not confine ourselves to Dutch group portraiture to appreciate the usefulness of Riegl's description of an art of physiognomic expression. The physiognomic art of fifteenth-century Flemish "realism" (Aby Warburg, "Flandrische Kunst und florentinische Frührenaissance," *Jahrbuch der königlich preußischen Kunstsammlungen* 23 [1902], 247–266); the grotesque face of Bosch, Quentin Massys, and Dürer (Jan Białostocki, "'Opus quinque dierum': Dürer's Christ among the Doctors and Its Sources," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 22 [1959], 17ff.; also, James Marrow, "Circumdedere me canes multi: Christ's Tormentors in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages and Early Renaissance," *Art Bulletin* 59 [1977], 167–187); in religious art, the development of dramatic close-ups that transform narrative events into dramas of the face (Sixten Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative* [Åbo:

an inner experience of the viewer."²² Riegl is not interested here in chronicling whatever the particular content of that inner experience might be, but rather in registering the ways the face effects a transformation from outer to inner, material to spiritual, which can elicit such an experience in the first place. Riegl refuses, that is, to indulge in that peculiar art historical habit of trying to read into the represented face the sitter's thoughts and feelings. Throughout this century, interpreters have been too confident not only in the ability of Rembrandt's faces to convey specific meanings, but also in their own ability as interpreters to say what that meaning is. Otto Benesch, for example, in a single page chosen at random from his essay on Rembrandt's late portraits, writes:

1965)); and the image of the Holy Face of Veronica, which played such an important role in late medieval devotion in Germany and the Netherlands (Ernst von Dobschütz, *Christusbilder* [Leipzig: 1899], 226ff.); all represent aspects of the face's privileged position in northern art, a phenomenon whose character and significance remains largely unexplored.

22. Riegl, *Das holländische Gruppenporträt*, 201; trans. my own.

The [Rembrandt's figures] are simply Christian, as simple, deep and human as Christian faith is. . . . *A deep humanity is their common link.* . . . [In] one of his most grandiose and deepest self-portraits, . . . profound wisdom lies in his questioning eyes turned towards us, while a faint smile plays around his lips, a smile not only of resignation, but also of deep loving understanding.²³

The metaphor of depth is invoked again and again, yet Benesch can muster little to fill that inwardness save an equally empty concept of humanity. Unlike Benesch and unlike the other physiognomists whom we discussed earlier, Riegl can describe the complex impression that Rembrandt's faces "contain" something very true and very real, without ever seeking to name what that content is. Thus shifting attention away from guesswork about character and thought, Riegl sets the stage for an enquiry into the *invention* and *uses* of interiority as it is conveyed by the represented face.

What follows is an attempt to reopen the question of the epiphany of the face in the visual arts. My concern here is less with what Rembrandt's representations of the face can tell us about the specific character of his art as a whole than with what his almost obsessive interpretation and study of physiognomic expression can tell us, more generally, about the face as an object of pictorial interest. Riegl's account of Dutch group portraiture gives us ample grounds for such a focus, for it sees Rembrandt as the most eloquent, but by no means the only, practitioner of an art devoted to physiognomic expression. Because, therefore, Rembrandt's art is the vehicle, not the final object of my discourse, I feel justified in choosing a somewhat eclectic approach to my material. First, I will show how, within one painting, Rembrandt thematizes the privileged status of the face. An interpretation of the 1659 *Moses* now in Berlin (fig. 5; Bred. 527)²⁴ will reveal both how the face's irreducible inwardness functions within the painting's represented event, and how this event itself interprets the meaning of that inwardness. Second, turning from a consideration of the meaning of a Rembrandt to an analysis of Rembrandt's mode of pictorial representation,²⁵ I shall examine how it is that the artist goes about studying physiognomic expression, and what that study tells us about the

23. Otto Benesch, "Worldly and Religious Portraits of Rembrandt's Late Art," *Art Quarterly* 19 (1959), 353.

24. Abraham Bredius, *Rembrandt's Paintings* (New York: 1935); henceforth referred to as "Bred."

25. I borrow this distinction from Svetlana Alpers, "Interpretation without Representation, or The Viewing of *Las Meninas*," *Representations* 1 (1983), 30–42.

epiphany of the face in representation. As we have seen in our discussion of the history of physiognomy, the face eludes discourse. As Emmanuel Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity*, "The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed."²⁶ With Rembrandt this is not an obstacle to, but rather an object of, interpretation. For perhaps more than any other artist it is Rembrandt who recognized and exploited the dimensions of elusiveness or nonobjectivity of the face.

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II. Face, text, and idol

. . . I will put you in a crevice of the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen." The Lord said to Moses, "Cut two stone tablets like the first, and I will write on the tablets the words which were on the first tablets. . . .

Exodus 33:22–34:1

Regarding the ongoing debate in the Rembrandt literature over the correct titles for certain of the artist's works, it is useful to take the stance of what Nietzsche would call the historian of an error. The history of the naming of Rembrandt's works could then be interpreted less as the steady progress toward an indisputable and fully identified *oeuvre* than as a symptom of something at the heart of Rembrandt's art: the artist's paintings seem often to resist being named, or at least they seem to withhold clues that would finally confirm the rightness of a title. Before interpreting Rembrandt's *Moses*, I shall briefly review the arguments about the painting's subject matter, examining what kinds of clues interpreters use to name the painting and what in the painting remains elusive even after it has been named. Traditionally, the question has been whether Rembrandt's *Moses* is showing the second tables of the Law to the people of Israel, or whether he is breaking the first tables in anger at his people's idolatry. Surely this distinction makes a difference to our experience of Rembrandt's image. For one thing, a *Moses* depicted casting down the tablets, shattering the very thing we see, is perceived as being unconscious of, or even hostile to, our gaze. Moreover, the question of the naming of Rembrandt's *Moses* brings into play one of the work's explicit themes: the relation between painted image and written text. For two things emerge from the

26. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 194.

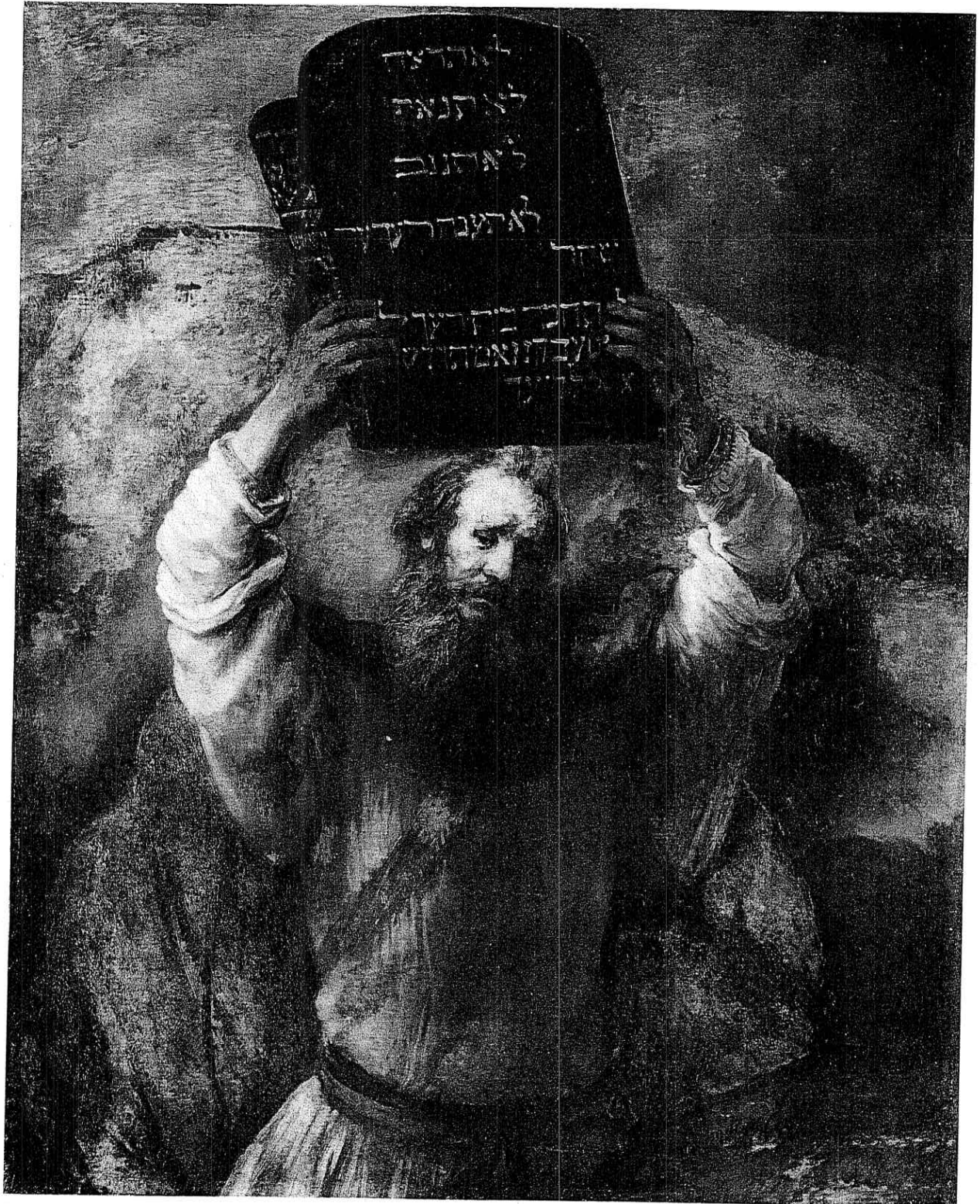


Figure 5. Rembrandt, *Moses with the Tables of the Law*, 1660. Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin (West).

painting's brownish-gold background to dominate the visual field: the glowing face of Moses, which gathers the painted image around itself, and the gold letters of the Law, which stand out from the black and shadowed tablets with a more-than-natural light. The *Berlin Moses* is an appropriate place to begin our discussion of Rembrandt, for here the artist is explicit in his treatment of the thematic of the face. In the juxtaposition of Moses and Scripture, we will read an allegory of the relationship between face and text.

The traditional interpretation of Rembrandt's painting as *Moses Breaking the Tables of the Law* was first disputed by A. Heppner in 1935. What disturbed Heppner was the disparity between the biblical narrative, in which Moses was said to have "fallen into a rage," and the expression on the face of Moses in Rembrandt's painting. Heppner asks of Rembrandt's *Moses*: "Is this melancholy face of the great mediator between God and the people of Israel really the face of a man whose 'anger waxed hot'? . . . It seems rather that a priestly figure holds the Holiest up in order that it can be seen far and wide."²⁷ Heppner is convinced that he can read the expression on Moses' face, and believes that this expression should correspond to a reading of the biblical text. The idea of a readable physiognomy that would agree with and therefore illustrate the event in a depicted narrative has its greatest spokesman in Alberti. In *Della pittura*, Alberti formulates some fundamental rules for history painting in terms of an ideal harmony between part and whole: "Bodies are part of the *istoria*, members are parts of the bodies, planes parts of the members . . . all bodies should harmonize in size and in function to what is happening in the *istoria*."²⁸ This principle of decorum must be observed at all levels of the painting, from the manner of its composition (i.e., all parts, down to the planes that make up the face, must be rendered consistently throughout the painting) to the proper response it should elicit: "Whatever the painted persons do among themselves or with the beholder, all is pointed toward ornamenting or teaching the *istoria*" (italics mine).²⁹ A central object of his discussion of decorum is the face. Alberti stresses that facial expression in a painting should suit both the inner moods and outer actions of the *istoria*'s players. Yet although the rules for its proper depiction are forever

being legislated by Alberti, the face is not itself a privileged object of representation. Rather, Alberti aims his advice at how *not* to let the face stand out from the painting as something distinct or Other. The face is potentially subversive, and its freedom of speech must be curtailed if an artist is to maintain the rules of decorum.

The Albertian harmony among narrative, gesture, and physiognomy is what Heppner imagines when he goes on to name Rembrandt's *Moses*. The sort of painting in which Moses would match his supposed fury and violent gesture with an angry face is, indeed, represented in early Rembrandt, as in *Christ Driving the Money-Changers from the Temple* (fig. 6; Bred. 486) of 1626: Christ's expression—his knit brow, fierce eyes, and frowning mouth—accords well with his angry gesture. Yet even here, where Rembrandt follows the rules of physiognomic decorum, where indeed physiognomy seems almost coextensive with gesture (e.g., Christ's raised hand and raised eyebrows), we are



Figure 6. Rembrandt, *Christ Driving the Money Changers from the Temple*, 1629. Pushkin Museum, Moscow.

27. A. Heppner, "'Moses zeigt die Gesetztafeln' bei Rembrandt und Bol," *Oud-Holland* 52 (1985), 241; trans. my own.

28. Alberti, *On Painting*, 72, 75.

29. *Ibid.*, 78.

in a pictorial world rather different from Alberti's. The interest of the painting lies in its attention to and foregrounding of diverse and expressive physiognomies. As in the strong northern tradition of half-length portraits depicting Christ and his tormentors (e.g., Hieronymus Bosch's problem work *Crowning with Thorns* in London, although in Rembrandt the action is reversed, with Christ striking rather than being struck by his enemies), the gestures of Rembrandt's players seem to accompany their faces only as attributes. Moreover, Heppner's assumption of a concord between gesture and facial expression fails to take into account one of the most characteristic features of northern painting. For, as Riegl demonstrates in his study of group portraiture, it is precisely the disjunction between body and face that enables Dutch painting to convey a sense of inwardness in its figures, and that distinguishes it most radically from Italian history painting. Nonetheless, Heppner's reading of the Berlin *Moses* was generally accepted. Jan Białostocki went so far as to generalize a method of determining the subject matter in Rembrandt through Heppner's example: "The proper interpretation [of a Rembrandt] can only be arrived at through the observation of the person depicted, his demeanor, and his facial expression."³⁰ The meaning of a Rembrandt, its inscription within a biblical narrative, proceeds from a reading of the face.

Heppner's reading of the Berlin *Moses* was finally disputed by Christian Tümpel, who, disregarding Moses' facial expression, found evidence for the painting's subject matter in the iconographic tradition out of which Rembrandt worked. Traditionally, a Moses depicted with his arms lifting the two overlapping tablets above his head always represents Moses *breaking* the tablets. Tümpel assembles a wealth of iconographic precedents for this gesture, mostly from the scenes of the Adoration of the Golden Calf. Tümpel uses a negative argument for his naming of the painting: given the figure's pose, he can represent *nothing but* Moses returning from his first ascent to Sinai. The issue of Moses' facial expression is, for Tümpel, unrelated to the painting's ostensible subject matter. As he writes, "Heppner makes the mistake of interpreting the mode of representation appropriate to late Rembrandt not as an aspect of style, but as an

iconographic motif."³¹ By relegating Moses' physiognomy to the realm of stylistic peculiarity, Tümpel empties the face of any primary semantic value. What kind of thing, then, is the face that it should not be included in the iconographer's inventory of objects that establish a painting's subject matter? Here and there, in Tümpel's and Heppner's discussions of the painting, we discern the face: on one hand, the face is something outside of iconography, outside of a text that would fix a name to the image; on the other hand, it is the primary text, the painted image as Law that dictates the image's identity no matter how incongruent the rest of the scene may be. Recalling our discussion of the paradoxes attending the study of physiognomy, we remember how written texts and iconographic or pictorial conventions threatened the autonomy of the face—indeed, how the face was always transformed into discourses about the face (as in Bouts's text-conscious contemplative man, or Le Brun's bovine man whose face was only its resemblance to the face of a cow). Against this threat, the epiphany of the face in Rembrandt seems to gather its authority.

Rembrandt's *Moses* is "about" the face, in the sense of being organized around it. The face takes its place in the midst of the visual world, at the center of the painting's astonishing symmetry. Its glowing form is ringed by a series of circles that gather the painting around its center. Most prominent is the halolike circle described by the curving forms of Moses' hands and arms, and below, by the darkness beneath his beard. The exact centerpoint of this circle is marked by Moses' right eye, which, gazing down and across to the left, is also the midpoint of the painting's width. Rembrandt augments the symmetry of this central circle by establishing other correspondences: the shadowed, lifeless hands that grasp the tablets are both equidistant from Moses' right eye; and the form of these hands is echoed in the sleeves of Moses' gown, which hang from his arms. In regard to Moses' hands, it is difficult to tell what holds them more in place, the tables of the Law, which they clutch, or the face, which they, in their gesture of clutching, circumscribe. Literally punctuating the epiphany of the face, their curved forms appear like gestural quotation marks around some spoken or foreign text. The circle formed by Moses' arms is contained within a series of looser circular

30. Jan Białostocki, "Ikonographische Forschungen zu Rembrandt's Werke," *Münchener Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst* 3:8 (1957), 198; trans. my own.

31. Christian Tümpel, "Studien zur Ikonographie der Historien Rembrandts," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 20 (1969), 174; trans. my own.

forms that play about the canvas and focus the image around the face: the outer limits of Moses' arms describe a circle, as do the curve of his belt below and the round edge of the tablet above. We can sense Rembrandt's insistence on the organizing curves of his image in certain lines that do not quite describe any particular objects: for example, the double line that curves up to the left from Moses' waist, as if it were part of the cape's contours, and the peculiar continuation of the line of Moses' belt beyond the edge of his body on the right are both suggestions of a principle of ordering that exceeds a naturalistic rendition of objects in space.

The painting's extraordinary symmetry is further emphasized by the strong diagonals carried chiefly by Moses' sash and by the diagonal shadow on the rock to the right of Moses. Running through the composition, they fashion an X as they intersect at the painting's central vertical axis—an axis that runs through the middle of Moses' body to that central right eye. Even the principal lines of Moses' face—that dark furrow of the brow that forms a line extending down the shadow to the left of the nostril—align themselves with these principal diagonals, running parallel to both Moses' sash and the line of his right forearm. Moses' expression, the shadows of his physiognomy, are thus inscribed in the lines that order the painted world. One senses too that Moses' highlighted brow, adumbrated by the curved "cloud" above his eye, is itself a circle of light that helps to organize the picture. It is also light that establishes the painting's horizontal axis: a glow passes across the image, brightening selectively the arms and face of Moses. Such light is the afterglow of the theophany, for in Exodus 34:34–35 we read that when Moses descended from Sinai, the skin of his face shone. In those tufts of hair that stand up from his forehead, we can see a tentative or naturalized version of the horns, which, through a traditional misinterpretation of this "shining," are the attributes of Moses.

The light that shines across the picture causes whatever it touches to stand out in relief against Rembrandt's otherwise flat image. Except for the folds of his sleeves and the shaded contours of his face, Moses casts down the tablets of the Law in a world virtually void of the illusion of depth. The uninterrupted brownish-gold tone of the painting does not distinguish between foreground and background. Moses' cape is of the same color and virtually the same flatness as the

rock in the foreground, or the mountains behind, or the sky for that matter. Indeed, with its severe shadows, the cape looks like a huge boulder that clamps the figure of Moses in an impossible space behind the foreground rock. The curious intersection between the edge of the cape on the right and the high point of the rock, which bears Rembrandt's signature, does not look like a view of overlapping forms in space, but a joining of flat planes of color on the two-dimensional surface of the canvas. It is uncanny how this juxtaposition of brown planes is repeated at the painting's presumed horizon: in the upper left, Rembrandt renders the meeting of the sky with the summit of Mount Sinai as an undifferentiated plane of brown with a dark line drawn through it. In a sense, the pictorial space of Rembrandt's *Moses*, with its overlapping of flat plane surfaces (the foreground rock, Moses' cape, Mount Sinai), echoes the structure of the tables of the Law—those two overlapping slabs of rock whose only depth is the thickness of their surfaces.

Painted surface and written text play against one another. Unlike most of his representations of writing, Rembrandt does not simply indicate the presence of the text with illegible signs that imitate the look of writing on a page. Like the letters in the London *Belshazzar* (Bred. 497), the Hebrew characters are clearly readable, although the text (again like the cryptic writing in *Belshazzar*) is a problematic or impossible one—the first text of the Law, smashed before it was ever shown to the people of Israel. Nor does Rembrandt assert here a fiction, as do most Dutch artists in their frequent representation of written inscription within the painted world,³² that the writing he shows us is part of the solid fabric of an objective world that is rendered illusionistically in the painting. There is little illusionism, little attempt to distinguish the surface of the tablets from the canvas surface in Rembrandt's inscription of the Law: he does not imitate the Hebrew characters as they would appear carved on the stone tablets, but merely writes them with golden paint on the blackened surface of the canvas. Conversely, certain areas of pictorial representation—for example, the black outline of Moses' left hand and the line of the horizon on the upper left—seem written with the same brush that had rendered the letters of the Law.

32. Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing* (Chicago: 1983), 173–192.

That horizon line in Rembrandt's *Moses* raises the question of the consistency or unity of Rembrandt's pictorial method. Where at the left of the canvas the meeting of sky and earth is drawn with a single dark line across a unified field of color, on the right the same horizon is defined by a juxtaposition of two different planes of color. Thus the same object can be rendered through radically different means in different parts of the canvas. Rembrandt does not seem to obey any rule of representational consistency, any Albertian principle that all parts must be in harmony with one another. Each area of the picture is a separate problem solved by different pictorial methods: while Moses' right hand is outlined in black, his left hand is not; while highlights generally suggest a raised surface in the painting (as in the sleeve), Moses' sash is set in relief by strokes of lighter paint that actually stand out in greater relief than the sash itself; while certain areas of Moses' head and body are silhouetted against a peculiar flat, dark tone unrelated to the background, other such areas are set immediately against the landscape; the lit portions of Moses' sleeves are rendered so volumetrically and with such a degree of finish that they seem to belong to another painting. The clearest example of this difference within representation is, of course, the face. Where most of the painting seems flat and even unfinished, Moses' face stands out as the focus of Rembrandt's painterly perfection. Just as it had been the focus of the painting's light and space, the face, with its subtle contours and its meticulous finish, represents a concentration of Rembrandt's craft. The distinctness, the otherness of Moses' face vis-à-vis the rest of the visible scene is reminiscent of the face's autonomy from the iconographic tradition as well. Where on a semantic level the face of Moses failed to express an appropriate physiognomy that would inscribe it in the scene's traditional iconography, on the level of representation the face stands out as *the* privileged object of the painting and of Rembrandt's art in general. Moses' care, his thoughtful and melancholy expression, is matched by the artist's painterly care. Rembrandt's *Moses* is a long way from the radical demystification of the face such as we find in Cézanne's *Self-Portrait with Palette* (fig. 7), where the contours of the artist's physiognomy are as inexpressive and flat as the pure pigment on his palette.

While Moses holds the tablets up to our gaze, Rembrandt installs the face at the center of our vision as an object to be read or interpreted. What message is captured in Moses' expression? Instead of attempting an



Figure 7. Paul Cézanne, *Self-Portrait with Palette*, ca. 1885–1887. Stiftung Sammlung E. G. Bührle, Zurich.

impressionistic reading of the face, let us listen to how Karel van Mander reads faces in his didactic poem "Den Grondt." Advising artists on the proper way to represent emotions in their figures, van Mander writes: "In regard to the forehead which the heathens consider to be the seat of the spirit, we must proceed with care, for many believe it to be the . . . face of thought or the book of the heart wherein one can read the human mind. Wrinkles and furrows [in the brow] are proof that in us is hidden a melancholy and care-ridden soul."³³ These furrows are compared to cheerless clouds in the sky, and are symptomatic "of a heart weighed down by sadness and discord."³⁴ Is it not such a cloud that gathers on the brow of Moses? Moreover, van Mander suggests that to represent a saddened or pensive face without tears, one should raise one eyebrow, close

33. Karel van Mander, "Den Grondt," ed. R. Hoecher, in *Quellenstudien zur holländischen Kunstgeschichte* 4 (Berlin: 1966), 29; trans. my own.

34. *Ibid.*, 30.

slightly the lids of the eyes, and "draw a furrow from the nose into the cheek."³⁵ This perfectly describes Moses' face, making it a type for the sad and troubled spirit. Surely this expression is, as Heppner noted, not one of anger, yet it is possible to regard Moses' melancholy face as fitting to both his gesture and the meaning of the biblical event. For according to a traditional Talmudic interpretation of the scene, Moses did not break the tablets in anger. Rather, upon seeing his people engaged in the sin of idolatry, Moses chose to take upon himself the wrath of God by destroying His tables: "Blot me rather from Thy Torah, King of the World; or rather, let me blot from the world Thy Torah. I alone knew it, I alone shall have sinned if I alone shattered it."³⁶ When seen in this light, Moses' expression is fitting for such a scene of disappointment and self-sacrifice. I, however, would prefer to leave the meaning of Moses' expression open. It suffices to say that his gaze, fixed on nothing in particular, creates the fiction of a look held back by something "interior," something hidden—thought, the self, or what you will. What exactly it is that is hidden might better be sought elsewhere, though, rather than in the fictional interiority of Moses' sad face.

For one thing, the tablet of the Law containing the first five commandments is hidden behind the tablet that Moses displays. Were it to be fully visible, we would be in a position to read God's interdict against idolatry, against "making the likeness of anything in heaven above, or on the earth below, or in the water of the earth" (Exodus 20:4)—surely an embarrassment to any artist. Moreover, this commandment brings to mind the scene of idolatry, which Rembrandt has left out in his iconographic *Herauslösung*. The image of Moses breaking the tablets is almost always just an anecdote within representations of the Adoration of the Golden Calf. In Lukas van Leyden's great triptych of this scene (fig. 8), for example, the figure of Moses is positioned far in the distance. Between him and us are placed first the crowd of feasters in bright clothing, and beyond them, the dance around the Golden Calf. One recent interpreter has related this painting to the iconographic controversies of the time, showing it to be an "image about imagery, a luxurious statement about luxury, even an icon about icons."³⁷ In the way the figure of

Moses is almost lost behind the riot of color and lavish genre imagery, Lukas associates our own visual experience with the worship of idols and false gods. Here and in virtually all representations of the Adoration of the Golden Calf, the Dionysiac dance around the idol creates an ironic and exaggerated foil for our own concentrated gazing at the painted image. Karel van Mander praised this painting in his biography of Lukas, remarking how lifelike was "the unchaste desire in [the people's] eyes."³⁸ In his own rendering of the scene (fig. 9), van Mander makes explicit the link between looking at the painting and worshiping an idol. The Golden Calf rises above the crowd in the distance at the exact center of the canvas. Its forms revolving around the idol in imitation of the dance of adoration, the painting becomes a gaze, a version of the unchaste looking that van Mander noted in Lukas's figures. In another example of this theme by the Italian mannerist painter Domenico Beccafumi (fig. 10), the Golden Calf is again situated at the exact center of our visual field. Not only is the idol seen by us, but it seems to return our gaze, eyeing us just as the people about it turn their eyes toward Moses. Looking is thus doubly problematic: the efficacy of the image, its ability to hold our gaze, is thus conveyed by the painted image's own ability to constitute a gaze that can hold us in its view.

In Rembrandt's *Moses*, the Golden Calf and its idolaters have been left out, and the painting focuses on what had been marginal or elided in Lukas van Leyden and Karel van Mander. What has taken its place at the exact center of this painting, organizing the circular dance of forms around it, is the face of Moses invested with an interiority that has kept interpreters fascinated. Its expression alters the biblical text, replacing external wrath with signs of internal thought. What text remains present in the painting—the gold letters of the Law—does not command our attention the way the face does, no matter how high aloft they are held. Although our discovery of an *agon* between face and text might seem a bit outlandish, it is good to remember that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, particularly in England, the image of the Decalogue was clearly associated with the iconoclastic controversies of the Reformation. Many churches replaced their painted images with the written text of the Mosaic Law, only to have the images restored when

35. Ibid.

36. As stated in Edmund Fleg, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Stephen Haden Guest (New York: 1928), 113.

37. Peter Parshall, "Some Visual Paradoxes in Northern Renaissance Art," *Wascana Review* (1981), 100.

38. Karel van Mander, *Dutch and Flemish Painters*, trans. Constant van de Wall (New York: 1956), 56.



Figure 8. Lucas van Leyden, *The Adoration of the Golden Calf*, 1525. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

the wave of iconoclastic zeal had subsided. In Rembrandt's problem work *Hanna with a Young Servant* (Bred. 577), the temple is similarly decorated with the Ten Commandments written in Hebrew. One Englishman, writing in the mid-sixteenth century, commented on the situation: "All images were pullyd down thorrow Ynglonde, and all churches whythelymed with the commandments on the walls."³⁹ In

39. Israel Abrahams, "The Decalogue in Art," in *Studies in Jewish Literature in Honor of Kaufmann Kohler* (Berlin: 1913), 50–51. Another important by-product of the iconoclasm of the sixteenth

century was the replacement of God the Father by the tetragram—the Hebrew name for God written in four characters. See Adolf Krücke, "Der Protestantismus und die bildliche Darstellung Gottes," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 13 (1959), 76–83. It is interesting to note, in this connection, that the strange disc in the so-called *Faust*

century was the replacement of God the Father by the tetragram—the Hebrew name for God written in four characters. See Adolf Krücke, "Der Protestantismus und die bildliche Darstellung Gottes," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 13 (1959), 76–83. It is interesting to note, in this connection, that the strange disc in the so-called *Faust*



Figure 9. Karel van Mander, *The Adoration of the Golden Calf*, 1602. Frans Halsmuseum, Haarlem.

Hendrik Goltzius's engraving *Moses with the Tables of the Law* (1583; fig. 11)⁴⁰ represents a curious taming of the visual image characteristic of mannerist art in the second half of the sixteenth century in Holland. The Law-Giver, properly equipped with a pointer as if ready to deliver a lesson, has become a textual interpreter. Behind his head and partially hidden by his "horns" of light is the tetragram, the iconoclast's answer to the representation of God the Father (see note 39). To the left of the second commandment, in the narrow space between the elaborate ornamental frame and the edge of the tablets, Goltzius has included a scene of the Adoration of the Golden Calf. The representation of idolatry has been put into its proper perspective: as a mere cautionary illustration of the commandment inscribed to its right, the minute scene is hardly noticeable at all, surviving on the periphery of the written text. And because it is also part of an

etching contains the word "te-dageram," along with the monogram of Christ. As H. M. Rotermund has pointed out ("Untersuchungen zu Rembrandt's Faust-radierung," *Oud-Holland* 72 [1957], 151–155), this object is probably modeled after amulets that invoke the name of God in different languages. The inscribed names of God in Rembrandt's *Faust* etching are, moreover, positioned precisely where the being's face would be whose hand we see below and to the right of the disc.

40. Walter L. Strauss, ed., *Hendrick Goltzius 1558–1617. The Complete Woodcuts, Engravings, and Etchings*, 2 vols. (New York: 1977), cat. no. 168.

illusionistic world "behind" the tablets, a world that includes the figure of Moses himself, the little scene gives perspective to that world as well, making it marginal to the Law. That pictorial image would be at the service of the Word—that, as Kurt Bauch wrote of Dutch mannerist art in general, the image should never speak for itself but should be only a figure pointing beyond itself to a particular and usually textual meaning⁴¹—is felt in the interest accorded to the Law-Giver's face. In Goltzius's *Moses* there are no fewer than thirty-six faces scattered throughout the engraving, and none stands out as more expressive than the rest. Moses' physiognomy thus has about as much inwardness as the decorative faces that grace the sides of the text of Matthew in the ornamental frame on the engraving's base. Thus emptied and multiplied, the human face becomes a version of border decoration that frames and privileges writing.

In Rembrandt's *Moses* it is the face, not writing, which finally dominates the visual field. There is something deeply subversive about his substitution. Touched by the fire of the Theophany, the face shines forth from a background whose flatness, whose almost tabletlike character, suggests an image diminished by the spirit of iconoclasm. Yet this pictorial *askesis* has as

41. Kurt Bauch, *Der frühe Rembrandt und seine Zeit* (Berlin: 1960), 48–50.



Figure 10. Domenico Beccafumi, *Moses Breaks the Tables of the Law*, 1537. Cathedral, Pisa.

its real aim an increased sense of the face's spatial presence: the face is what remains of the image and that transcends writing. Endlessly interpretable and finally indecipherable, the face presents itself as a sign whose effective message is far in excess of anything written or spoken. Which god, though, does this golden countenance serve—the God of Israel, the relation to whom is evidenced in the face's otherworldly glow, or that other spirit that bade the chosen people to cast its graven image in gold? The Calf was fashioned as a desperate substitute in the absence of a true God; its construction was precipitated in those last hours of Moses' forty-day absence, when "the people saw that [he] delayed to come down out of the mount" (Exodus 32:1). As the incarnation of the deity it represents, the Golden Calf must indeed have been a happy ersatz for a mediate God, a God, moreover, who forbade representation and whose message was conveyed only



Figure 11. Hendrik Goltzius, *Moses with the Tables of the Law*, 1583.

through an imperfect and seemingly tardy mediator. In a sense, what turns an image into an idol (and what informs, therefore, the second commandment) is its apparent claim to have the object of its mimesis, its ability to make the viewer respond to its epiphany as the true and unique embodiment of the thing it represents. Is this not what Rembrandt's interpreters want from and discover in his images? When Otto Benesch, for example, writes that "the human face sufficed to Rembrandt to convey everything, even the mysteries of religion and the history of the past,"⁴² then we surely have passed from the realm of aesthetic experience into the domain of religious desire. Thus perhaps it is as Riegl predicted: that the spectator him- or herself carries out the painting's deepest intentions. Even if we cannot agree on the proper title for

42. Benesch, "Worldly and Religious Portraits," 336.

Rembrandt's *Moses*, such an interpretive stance as Benesch's fulfills the biblical narrative. For by casting our eyes from the tables of the Law, from the sacred writing of the faceless God of Israel, down to the golden face of Moses' humanity, do we now replay the very idolatry that would make Moses cast the tables to the ground? Could indeed that mystery that is hidden in the face be thus less a trace of "deep humanity" (Benesch) than the uncanny reemergence of a false god?

III. The study of the face

Always behind its signs and its works, always within its secret interior and forever discreet, interpreting all historical totalities through its freedom of speech, the face is not "of this world." It is the origin of the world.⁴³

Jacques Derrida

What kind of thing is the face that its representation in art can thus command the authority of an idol? Or to put it less radically, what is it about the face that enables it to distinguish itself from its surroundings to the extent that the rest of the world appears centered or organized around it? Surely it has to do with the dialectical role that the face plays in constructing us as subjects in the world; that is, we relate to the face not only as an object visible to our sight, but also as a subject, a consciousness that potentially can see us. Moreover, in its readable expression, its capacity (as Leonardo writes) to "display the intent of [the] mind,"⁴⁴ the face betrays its fundamental relation to the order of language, a relation that deepens, of course, when we remember that the face is the organ of speech itself. Such considerations, however, would lead us far beyond the question of the epiphany of the face in Rembrandt into a more general discussion of the face's agency in human intersubjectivity. Suffice it to say that when Rembrandt reduces painting to an art of expressive physiognomy, when he darkens and flattens his image so that all that is left is the glowing and virtually tactile presence of the painted face, he is only exploiting, not inventing, the inherent nonobjectivity of the human face as such. The interpretive response of a Benesch, which treats a Rembrandt portrait as if it were a mere container for a unique and readable consciousness, is less an adequate account of the artist's specific achievement or pictorial strategy than a testimony to Rembrandt's success in endowing a

43. Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," 103.

44. Leonardo, *Treatise on Painting*, 150.

painted image with the face's natural freedom of speech.

In the Berlin *Moses* we are lucky to have a painting that thematizes the painted image's potential power to elicit responses appropriate to a real human face. Because the biblical narrative of the Law-Giver sets so many different forces in opposition (e.g., human representation versus divine message, graven image versus written text, idolatrous pleasure versus the dictates of a faceless, imageless God), Rembrandt invites us to test the status of his own production against such mythic categories. In my own argument, I have regarded the discourse of writers like Benesch as evidence for a fundamentally idolatrous dimension to Rembrandt's painting; the "cult" that is served here is, of course, that of the nineteenth century's religion of art, in which the presiding deity is the presence of the self in the artist's work. Needless to say, what finally transforms an image into an idol is the particular stance of the viewer; to think otherwise, to regard idolatry as proceeding from some characteristic inherent in the image itself, is to become something of an idolater oneself. As Luther points out in his discussions of the abuse of Christian images, the iconoclast's attack on pictures merely repeats the idolater's fundamental error, which is to impute to the image a power and a consciousness all its own. What kind of viewer, then, was Rembrandt himself? In the remaining pages, I shall shift our attention from the face's function and meaning within our viewing of a Rembrandt to a consideration of how the artist went about observing and depicting the human face. An examination of Rembrandt's sustained study of the face will enable us to discern more clearly the specific nature of the face's epiphany in his art.

Rembrandt's mastery of the face, his innovativeness in creating expressive and legible physiognomies, was recognized from the start.⁴⁵ Arnold Houbraken, for

45. Constantyn Huygens's autobiography is the earliest text we have of a writer attempting to decipher one of Rembrandt's expressive physiognomies. Praising the young Rembrandt, Huygens singles out the painting of *Judas Returning the Thirty Pieces of Silver* (1629; Bred. 539a) for comment and reads into the face of Christ's betrayer a complex story of guilt and hopelessness (see Walter Strauss and Margon von der Meulen, *The Rembrandt Documents* [New York: 1979], 69–71). This practice of speculating on the thoughts of the sitters in Rembrandt's canvases, thus established as early as the first phase of the artist's career, characterizes most of the later literature on Rembrandt, from Goethe's seminal essay, "Rembrandt als Denker" (*Werke* [Zurich: 1978], 13: 1080–1082), to the many art historical discussions of Rembrandt in this century.

example, in his *Groote Schouburgh* written a few decades after Rembrandt's death, acknowledges the artist's greatness in this field, praising in particular the extraordinary variety of faces with which his paintings are endowed. In regard to Rembrandt's "inexhaustible" strength in the field of physiognomic expression, Houbraken writes:

He surpasses everyone. And I know of no one whose various sketches of a single object differ in so many different ways. This, however, is the result of his penetrating observation of the most varied emotions which attend particular events and which reflect themselves in the physiognomies of people, in the expressions on their faces.⁴⁶

It is telling that Houbraken relates Rembrandt's achievements here to his unique mode of pictorial research, which combines the intense observation of the varieties of human bodily expression with a general tendency to render one particular object in a variety of ways. For as we shall see, the represented face's ability to suggest the inner life of the sitter is intimately bound up with the artist's willful problematization of the relationship between the pictorial image and what it is supposed to represent. Houbraken can relate physiognomic variety to variety of representational modes (a variety that was evident, we remember, in the representational inconsistencies of the Berlin *Moses*) because it is the face that most betrays the inadequacy of the image to capture its object fully. Of course, it is in part this very sense of "something more than meets the eye" that makes the epiphany of the face in Rembrandt the occasion for complex and often fanciful interpretations.

Nothing is gotten for nothing, however. Critics noticed early that the face's heightened expressivity was bought at the expense of the rest of the image. Houbraken, for example, is most explicit in blaming this aspect of Rembrandt's work. While celebrating Rembrandt's meticulous attention to the details of physiognomy, he notes that this care rarely extends to the execution of the image as a whole. The background and peripheral figures are often "smeared in with the coarse brush of a house-painter."⁴⁷ In the drawing of the *Lamentation Over the Dead Body of Christ* (fig. 12;

46. Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der nederlantische konstschilders en schilderessen*, in *Quellenschriften für Kunstgeschichte und Kunsttechnik des Mittelalters und der Renaissance*, 24 (Vienna: 1880), 112–113.

47. *Ibid.*, 113.



Figure 12. Rembrandt, *Lamentation Over the Dead Body of Christ*, 1635. Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin (West).

Ben. 100 recto),⁴⁸ we can see what Houbraken means. The profile of Christ, cradled in the arms of the Virgin, stands out from the scene as if it were drawn with another pen. The careful attention to the shaded contours of Christ's cheeks and chin, the delicate rendering of his half-closed eyes, the three-dimensionality imparted to his open mouth, and the fine lines that represent his hair all stand in contrast to the generalized physiognomy of most of the other figures, not to mention the swift lines that indicate the presence of a figure in the background. Of course, the *Lamentation* is only a drawing; yet, as we have already seen, the sense of a difference between representation of the face and the world was well-documented in the Berlin *Moses*. Furthermore, it is in Rembrandt's practice as a draughtsman that Houbraken locates a cause of the artist's overall lack of finish. As proof of the status that Rembrandt gave to the face in his art, and as explanation of his failure in other realms, Houbraken cites an anecdote about the artist's study of the face:

48. Otto Benesch, *The Drawings of Rembrandt*, 6 vols. (London: 1954–1957); henceforth referred to as "Ben."

"Many of Rembrandt's students have told me that he occasionally sketched a face in ten different ways before he ever put it on canvas."⁴⁹ In the case of objects that did not interest him, however, he merely painted them in with no preparation or study.

What exactly was the nature of Rembrandt's sustained study of the face? The meaning and function of Rembrandt's character studies or *tronies* have not been adequately examined. They have their roots in the tradition of model books or sheets, common since the late Middle Ages, in which an artist would gather a variety of figural and physiognomic types for reference and subsequent use in his (or his students') composition.⁵⁰ Kurt Bauch has traced the function and transformation of Rembrandt's *tronies*, identifying three stages in the artist's study of the face. First, Rembrandt observed the human face as part of his proper education as *historiographicus pictor*;⁵¹ his drawn and etched *tronies* were to provide him with models for the execution of history paintings. Next, Rembrandt began to endow these faces with enough content to become autonomous (and collectable)⁵² works of art. And finally, this heightened interest in the face initiates and instructs Rembrandt's activities as portraitist.

Summarizing his own argument, Bauch writes, "Step by step the model book face, conceived of for use in history painting, is transformed into the autonomous study of a head, which in turn is transformed into portraiture."⁵³ Bauch's story of the face in Rembrandt is instructive, for it questions the notion that the *tronie* was a mere aid for history painting: Rembrandt's study of the face is bound up with his own transformation as an artist. Yet we must remember that each of Bauch's terms—history painting, autonomous work of art, portrait—are radically reinterpreted by Rembrandt. Coming to portraiture from history painting, Rembrandt is able to infuse the physiognomic likeness with a sense of movement, expressivity, and plot that were totally lacking in, say, the mannerist portraits of Goltzius. On

49. Houbraken, *De grotte schouburgh*, 115.

50. See James Marrow and Alan Shestack, *Hans Baldung Grien: Prints and Drawing*, exhibition catalog (New Haven: 1981), 105–110.

51. Dutch seventeenth-century manuals on the art of painting often began with instructions on how to represent the human face. See, for example, Christijn van de Passe, *'t Light der leken en schilder konst*, facs. ed. (Soest: 1973), 18–37.

52. As early as 1629 Rembrandt's *tronies* are mentioned in a will; see Abraham Bredius, *Künstler-Inventar* (The Hague: 1915), 1: 219.

53. Bauch, *Der frühe Rembrandt*, 177.



Figure 13. Rembrandt, *Three Studies for a Disciple at Emmaus*, 1633–1634. Fondation Custodia (F. Lugt Collection), Paris.

the other hand, in his history paintings, Rembrandt exploits the privileging of the face as it occurs in portraiture, in order to internalize all events and texts into the drama of an active and legible physiognomy. As to the question of the autonomy of the *tronie* as a work of art, other artists before Rembrandt produced study sheets that were admired, collected, and copied—witness Leonardo, Frans Floris, Hans Baldung Grien, and Jacques De Gheyn II. Bauch maintains that "the face . . . itself had enough 'content' for Rembrandt that he made it into a theme of art."⁵⁴ We must ask ourselves what this content is specifically for Rembrandt. What is the real *subject* of Rembrandt's study of the face?

In *Three Studies for a Disciple at Emmaus* (fig. 13; Ben. 87), Rembrandt has drawn three different versions of the same seated figure, exemplifying that practice of representational variety mentioned by Houbraken in his discussion of the artist. Each figure displays a very

54. *Ibid.*

distinct posture and facial expression (even though the sitter's likeness, his face as it would be rendered in, say, a Goltzius, remains constant throughout), and each is represented by Rembrandt in varying degrees of overall finish. In the version at the bottom of the sheet, perhaps the most finished of the three, the disciple sits in his chair as if bracing himself or pushing himself back with his arms. His chin is tucked into his chest, and his face, with its open mouth and raised eyebrows, conveys his astonishment at the miraculous return of Christ. If we compare this version to the rendition of the disciple at the left of center on the sheet, we notice some subtle differences. The body here leans forward from the chair; the arms, which in the figure below had only served to brace the body, now potentially lift the disciple from his chair. Similarly, the eyes, although still expressing astonishment through their raised brows, now seem to draw the head and body forward and upward. In the figure at the top of the sheet, this eyebrow seems reduced to a sign, an arrow pointing in the direction in which the disciple raises his body. The ambiguity held in the two upper figures—that is, whether the arms hold the disciple back or lift him forward, and whether the eyes suggest someone shrinking back from or drawing forward toward the object of his gaze—perfectly expresses the figure's situation. For the scene at Emmaus is one of fear and recognition, fear of the unknown and supernatural, and recognition of the risen Christ.⁵⁵

Visual recognition is an activity of the eye and the mind. As such, it poses a particularly difficult problem for pictorial representation. It is fascinating to observe how Rembrandt translates the "internal" act of recognition into a legible activity of the face and body—how, in effect, Rembrandt makes recognition recognizable. He does this, I think, by suggesting a distinction between physiognomy and gesture, between the face and body—a distinction, we recall, that is at the heart of what Riegl called the attitude of *Aufmerksamkeit*. In the version of the disciple at the left of center, the figure's body, leaning forward in the direction of his gaze yet arrested at the point between rising further and drawing back, seems legislated by the activity of the eye. For the eye and therefore the face open onto the world in a way different from how the body does. Vision has already traversed and described a distance before it becomes a gesture of touch or grasp. In our drawing, the gaze goes forth to meet its

55. See Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 346–347.



Figure 14. Rembrandt, *Sheet of Studies with the Head of Mordecai*, ca. 1656. Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam.

object—the epiphany of Christ—before the body has lifted itself in greeting or drawn back in fear. Rembrandt expresses this privileged openness of the face to the world by literalizing the face's activity: the face and body gesture toward the object of sight only to make legible the fact that, at bottom, seeing is not gesture. The epiphany of the face as expression reveals the face to be visual as well as visible, something that sees and is seen.

Rembrandt's study of the face in the Emmaus drawing has nothing to do with the traditional interest in particular character types or unusual physiognomies. Unlike, say, the extreme physiognomic diversity of Leonardo's famous *Five Grottesque Heads*, now in Windsor Castle, Rembrandt's three figures are different versions of the same face, even the same emotion, each time represented, however, in a distinct manner.⁵⁶ Otto

56. In a sense, the three versions taken together create the truest image of the disciple's recognition. The drawing's curious *mise-en-page*, in which no figure dominates the visual field, sets our eye in

Benesch, in his catalog of Rembrandt's drawings, calls the Emmaus drawing a "study from life," yet it seems rather that the artist is engaged more in experimenting with different signs or conventions that will render his image recognizable. Take, for example, the mouth. In the figure at the upper right, the disciple's downturned lips are accentuated by the commalike mark to their right; this mark seems to be less of a furrow or wrinkle in the subject's cheek (an *actual* effect of the face's movement, as Leonardo would have it) than it is a sign indicating the mouth's movement. In this mark, and in the exaggerated furrows of the brow in all the figures, we are closer to the realm of caricature than of a "study from life." In the figure to the left, the mark on the cheek has vanished, replaced by the amplified line of the disciple's downturned lips. And the figure on the lower part of the page (which I take to be the first of the three drawings) betrays an altogether different solution, replacing the downturned mouth with an opened one. These different versions suggest not an attempt to reproduce, as accurately as possible, a particular mouth, but rather to test out different formulas or conventions for a mouth within a generally similar figure.

A much clearer example of what we might call Rembrandt's consciousness of the *signlike* character of the represented face is the somewhat later *Sheet of Studies with the Head of Mordecai* (fig. 14; Ben. 1005). Here the artist experiments with different versions of the same profile face observed from the same angle, yet each of the profiles is different in some detail. In the two on the right, Rembrandt tries out the effects of shading the area below the eyes; in the top version, the upper line of the eye is indicated, adding a sense of concentration that is lacking in the lower version. Elsewhere he experiments with the effect that different angles of the eyebrows have on the whole face. Rembrandt's study of the face is thus not so much a matter of careful observation, a drawing "from life," but an experimentation with diverse representational means to achieve a suitably expressive physiognomy. It suggests, moreover, a denial of any necessary identity between the image and what it represents. The truth of the face in Rembrandt, that guarantee of representational authenticity and humanness that so impresses Riegl and Benesch, is bound up with an awareness of the fictions and conventions of representation.

motion among the three versions, enabling us to apprehend the emotion of Rembrandt's elusive subject.

The peculiar status of the image in Rembrandt's *tronies* becomes apparent when we compare the drawings that we have just discussed with the *Study of Nine Heads* from 1609 by Jacques De Gheyn (fig. 15). In Rembrandt's Emmaus drawing, the face was represented as an event—the opening of the self onto the world as it was revealed through the visible "gesture" of the gaze. The lines and signs of physiognomic expression conveyed the fiction, moreover, of an interiority that distinguished the face from objects in the world. In De Gheyn, the face is returned to this realm of mere objects. His drawing, less a study of the face than a study of the head, represents the boy's facial features with no more or less accuracy and pictorial interest than it does the locks of his hair. De Gheyn not only does not privilege the face; he avoids it with a vengeance. The boy gazes everywhere but in our direction, frustrating our desire



Figure 15. Jacques De Gheyn II, *Study of Nine Heads*, 1604. Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin (West).

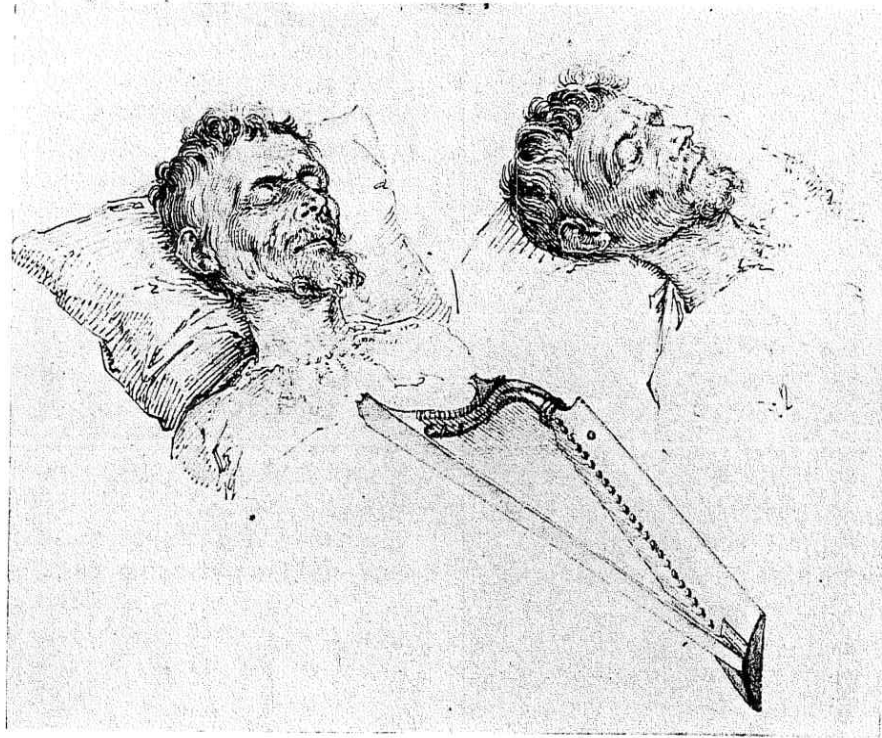


Figure 16. Jacques De Gheyn II, *Study of a Man on His Deathbed*, ca. 1606. Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt.

to meet him face to face. Svetlana Alpers has written that "De Gheyn's attentive eye does not credit the head with any human inwardness that would distinguish it from the seed of a plant."⁵⁷ Perhaps he avoids the face here because it would subvert the image's claim to objectivity—the portrait head as object, as *Ding-an-sich* perfectly matched by its representation in the image. Nothing could be further from De Gheyn's extreme representational consistency than Rembrandt's method of studying the face. If Rembrandt feels that he has not captured his subject, he will draw it over again, trying out various graphic formulas, employing different degrees of finish, and assembling the products on a single sheet. De Gheyn, on the other hand, confident of the power of representation to describe its object fully, will look more closely and draw more carefully. The product, as in the *Study of Nine Heads*, is an image that proclaims that there is nothing lost to representation, that there is not more than meets the eye. In his *Study of a Man on His Deathbed* (fig. 16),

57. Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, 85.

De Gheyn's art finds an appropriate motif in the inanimate face. It is telling that the lines with which De Gheyn renders the shaded contours of the head—those long, parallel hatchings carried over from his practice as engraver—seem to adhere to the face, shifting the shape of their curves exactly with the shift in vantage point. Where Rembrandt's study of the face brought out the essential difference between the image and what it represents, here the conventions of the image become part of the observed face.

A viewing of De Gheyn helps us to recognize what Rembrandt is not. We shall conclude our discussion of Rembrandt's study of the face in a similar vein, by considering a curious vicissitude of his expressive faces in subsequent art. In an etching by Wenzel Hollar entitled *Democritus and Heraclitus* (fig. 17), two of Rembrandt's studies of the face have found their way into a very different work of art. The scene recalls a passage from Ficino in which the author describes a certain quattrocento painting: "You have seen in my gymnasium the painting of the Sphere of the world, and on one side Democritus, and on the other Heraclitus,

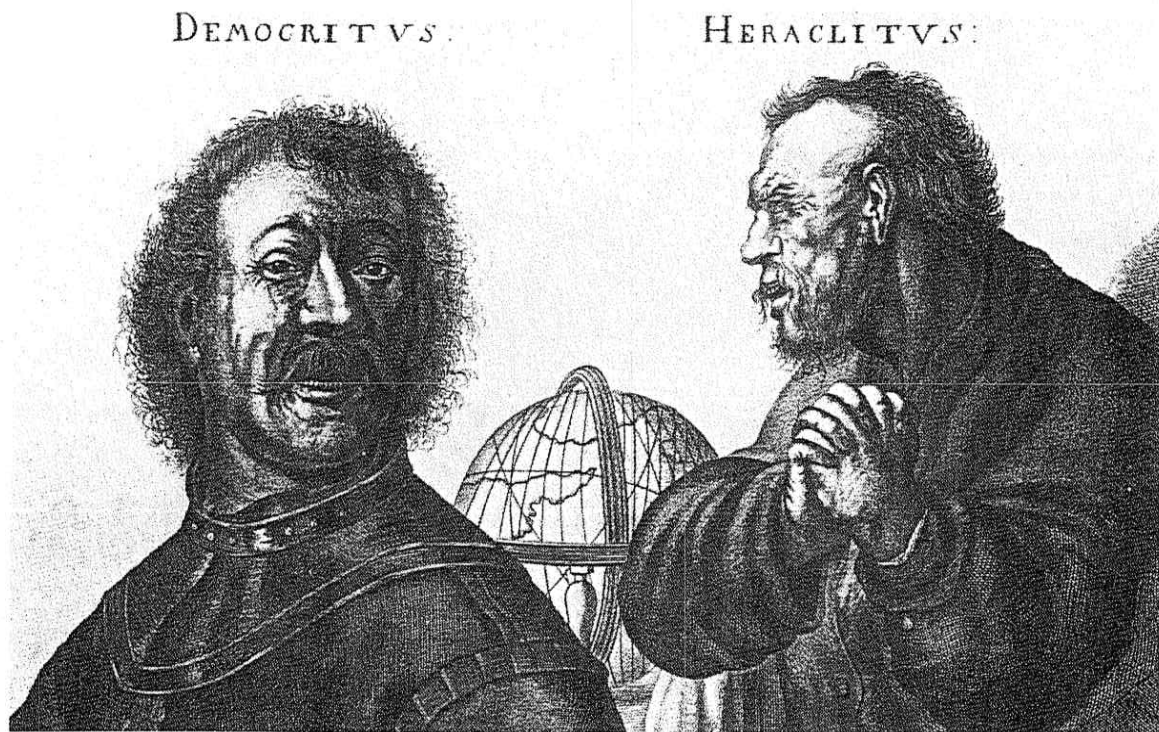


Figure 17. Wenzel Hollar, *Democritus and Heraclitus*, ca. 1640.

one laughing, the other crying."⁵⁸ For the weeping Heraclitus, Hollar has used a copy by van Vliet of a study by Rembrandt for the figure of Judas as he appears in the early *Judas Returning the Thirty Pieces of Silver* from 1629—a figure whose expression was admired by Constantyn Huygens (see note 45).⁵⁹ The laughing Democritus, too, derives from one of Rembrandt's etched self-portraits in which the artist observes himself "making a face." Hollar's etching implies, I think, a curious misprision of Rembrandt on two counts. First, by labeling the two figures "Democritus" and "Heraclitus," and, by implication, by dividing the world into these two basic types, Hollar transforms Rembrandt's implicit notion of the face as a vehicle for ambiguous and therefore multivalent expression into a physiognomist's fiction of the perfectly legible and categorizable face. Second, Hollar's

58. Marsiglio Ficino, *Opera Omnia* (Basel: 1576), 637; as quoted in E. H. Gombrich, "Botticelli's Mythologies," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 8 (1947), 57.

59. Seymour Slive, *Rembrandt and His Critics 1630–1730* (The Hague: 1952), 30–32.

overdefinition of the meaning of the face extends to the nature of his pictorial image. The spontaneous and consciously signlike lines that had rendered expression in Rembrandt's *tronies* give way to an arduous job of careful copying. The expression of Heraclitus is captured through the minute attention to and meticulous rendering of every muscle and wrinkle. In fact, the truth of expression is rather confused in the process. Just as Alberti and Leonardo had warned, the laughing figure looks as pained as his crying counterpart.

I think it is fitting that Rembrandt's study of the face should meet such a fate. Rembrandt's graphic method, which denied the identity between the image and what it represents, itself becomes the object of careful study by artists who, in trying to capture Rembrandt's faces, affirm their belief in the essential copy. The *aporia* at the heart of physiognomy—the question of the face as truth or as convention—is thus replayed at all levels of the history of Rembrandt's study of the face. Rembrandt's true physiognomies, praised by everyone from Huygens and Houbraken to Riegl and Benesch, yet themselves based on an awareness of their own fictiveness,

become the source of fact for the subsequent representation of the face. In Hollar's etching, itself a copy of a Rembrandt, the face has taken its place among its trusted fictions, affirming the belief in the full legibility of physiognomy and in the unproblematic status of representation.

IV. The denial of the face

In all faces is seen the Face of faces, veiled, and in a riddle; howbeit unveiled it is not seen, until above all faces a man enter into a certain secret and mystic silence where there is no knowledge or concept of a face.⁶⁰

Nicolas of Cusa

We have only begun here to discern the face in Rembrandt. It would be necessary now to examine how the epiphany of the face functions in different ways throughout the artist's complex oeuvre. One would have to look, for example, at the *Blinding of Samson* (Bred. 501), in which the Philistines' violence against the face and eyes of Samson is expressed in the painting's own felt violation of our eyes, its assault on the nudity of our open faces as spectators. Presented as a gift to Huygens, the *Blinding of Samson* is perhaps Rembrandt's answer to the *Medusa* of Rubens (itself a face that could horrify and delight, and which for this reason was kept covered by a curtain), which Huygens owned and admired.⁶¹ Huygens seems to have rejected the *Samson*, but Rembrandt still forced it on him, thrusting it in his face with the note: "I now send this canvas, against your express wishes, in hope that you will not hold it against me." One would have to look also at the *Bathsheba* (Bred. 521), in which the text of King David's letters is reinscribed in the contemplative face of the heroine. Also of interest would be the painting *Uzziah Stricken with Leprosy* (Bred. 179), in which the king's punishment and our witnessing of that punishment coalesce in the glow that lights his face: for in Flavius Josephus we read, "A brilliant shaft of sunlight gleamed through [the riven temple] and fell upon the king's face so that leprosy at once smote him."⁶² Most important, one would have to confront Rembrandt's own face, that is, his obsessive activity in the field of self-portraiture. I wish to conclude this essay, though, with a brief look at a picture in which

the truth of the face, its ability to mediate the thought or inner life of its wearer, is the painting's explicit theme—the *Denial of Peter* of 1660 (fig. 18; Bred. 594) now in Amsterdam.

It is night. A woman holds a candle up to the face of Peter and lights the center of the scene. As she looks at Peter she conceals from our eyes the candle's flame. She has accused the apostle of being a disciple of Christ and she is watching his response. For as we read in Luke 22:56, "A maid seeing [Peter] as he sat in the light and gazing at him said, 'This man was also with him.'" The woman's gaze both tests her recognition of Peter and observes his denial. All eyes are focused on Peter: the woman, the soldiers in the foreground, and the darkened group behind. As Jacob Rosenberg writes, "In the composition of the *Denial* everything hinges upon the expression of Peter from whom an answer is expected."⁶³ Instead of words, instead of Peter's denial, Rembrandt gives us a false face: our visual attention is focused on the half-lit face as it betrays its wearer's lie. In an anecdote told by Pliny and recalled by Alberti, the painter Euphranos demonstrated his skill by depicting "Ulysses . . . painted so that you could recognize this insanity was feigned not real."⁶⁴ The lie in the presented face is thus a hyperbole of a painter's skill in expressive physiognomy.

Yet is Peter's lie really revealed in his face? Are his troubled features enough, that is, to convey the message of false denial? Commentators have noted that his gesture—the one hand clutched at his breast, the other held out from his side—is the traditional sign of denial.⁶⁵ Yet the situation is more complex than this. Peter's right hand is concealed by the cloak, suggesting both his posture of self-protectiveness, which causes him to lie, and the act of lying or concealment itself. This cloaked hand, placed as it is directly below his half-lit face, is thus an attribute of the lie. His other hand, though, is naked and open as he gestures to say, "I do not know him." And directly above that hand is the turned face of Christ peering from the darkness in our direction. In Luke we read that when Peter had denied Christ three times as prophesied, "the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, 'before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.' And

60. Nicolas of Cusa, *The Vision of God*, trans. Evelyn Underhill (London: 1928), 26.

61. See Horst Gerson, *Rembrandt's Paintings* (Amsterdam: 1968), 52.

62. *Ibid.*, 222.

63. Jacob Rosenberg, *Rembrandt: Life and Work* (London: 1968), 226.

64. Alberti, *On Painting*, 73.

65. J. Richard Judson, "Pictorial Sources for Rembrandt's Denial of St. Peter," *Oud-Holland* 79 (1964), 144ff.



Figure 18. Rembrandt, *The Denial of Peter*, 1660. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

he went out and wept bitterly." Peter's open hand thus gestures toward the open face of Him in whom the real truth of Peter's denial is revealed. That the apostle's gesture of denial should become, within the painted world's plot, a pointing out of the very thing denied (Peter's relation to Christ) is fitting; for the biblical narrative is a story about how, by betraying Christ with his lie, Peter confirmed His divinity, and beyond that about how we are all liars when compared to Christ's truth. The cloaked and open hands gesture, respectively, to the liar's face and the face of truth. Yet the opposition of falsehood and truth, fiction or fact, is not sustained within the juxtaposition of the represented faces themselves: Christ's face is no more open, no more readable, than the troubled physiognomy of his errant disciple. I think that the *Denial of Peter* can

caution us against too easy a passage from the represented face to its imagined interiority. It suggests that a hermeneutics of presence, in which the relation between painted likeness and viewing subject is imagined as a simple encounter of self with self, cannot in itself penetrate to the truth about the face. Just as the truth about Peter emerges only when we pass behind or beyond his face to the obscured Face of faces in the darkness, so too the message of Rembrandt's expressive physiognomies is never what or where we think it is. Neither an objective likeness of the thing it represents nor the transparent vehicle for an immanent subjectivity, the face in Rembrandt acquires its meaning only within the essential obliqueness of its message, and within the dangerous probability that this message will be believed but wholly misunderstood.