

Rembrandt at the Vatican

IMAGES FROM HEAVEN AND EARTH



The World at War around Rembrandt

Arnold Nesselrath

WAR IS THE HALLMARK of the 17th century. It was its main output, even if the period is generally known as the baroque era. The 17th century was full of simultaneous wars, which were spread all over the globe. These wars were mainly fought to gain power, to expand trade, or in the name of religions. They created humanitarian disasters of unbelievable dimensions. The thirty years' war is considered the fiercest and most horrifying armed conflict until World War I. In fact, the 17th century actually witnessed a world war, long before the 20th century coined the term.

The wars of the 17th century were so long that they are sometimes named according to their durations. There was the eighty years' war between Spain and the Netherlands (1568–1648) as well as the thirty years' war (1618–1648) between almost all European powers, which was fought on German soil and which with its religious factions soon resembled or became a civil war. The Great Turkish war beginning with the siege of Vienna in 1683 lasted over 15 years (1683–1699). The English Civil War dragged on for nineteen years (1641–1660), and so on. Because of the criss-cross of alliances, the mercenary armies, and the different religious affiliations, wars were frequently entangled with one another, or, as Thomas Hobbes put it in his philosophical and theoretical discourse of the *Leviathan*, it was a real “bellum omnium contra omnes”. Thus, peace treatises grew into complexity and sometimes had to struggle with more than one war at a time, when a way was sought out of the hostilities. The famous Peace of Westphalia, which was signed in Münster and Osnabrück in 1648, not only dealt with both the eighty and the thirty years' wars, but also had to take the Scandinavian powers involved in various conflicts into consideration, before it could finally end these two long lasting conflicts together. The peace agreements inevitably deepened and sadly consolidated the schism between Catholics and Protestants, since the treatises stipulated the difference between faiths and assigned the decision about the religious affiliation to the rulers.

The wars of the 17th century were armed conflicts of all types. The thirty years' war was largely a war of terror, which threw the entire central Europe into utter chaos. The cruelties were mainly aimed at ordinary people, often at single persons; even scattered peasants in the countryside were brutally tortured and lynched. Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen (1621–1676) delivered a most gruesome, yet authentic insider's description in his *Adventures of Simplicius Simplicissimus* based on his personal experience, and

Jacques Callot (1592–1635) brought the disasters he witnessed in his shocking and uncensored series of etchings before our eyes forever. In these literary and artistic works, the famous expression devised by Thomas Hobbes, “homo homini lupus”, can be seen literally up-close and as a personal experience.

There were, of course, conventional types of war, i.e. military campaigns, where armies fought classical battles mainly to achieve their leaders’ imperialist goals and to conquer a territory by declaring its sovereign an enemy. An absolute king like Louis XIV was one such type of an aggressor. There were invasions and sieges. Wars were even exported or distanced to outlying territories or were offshored to colonies faraway in remote parts of the world, where people had not even heard of the fighting contenders. Sometimes the armed conflicts were confined just to the oceans, where the armadas of trade and war confronted each other under very distinct conditions fighting strategically sophisticated, almost technical, massive naval battles. The Dutch government was among the protagonists who granted privileges for engaging in combat, building fortifications, minting and issuing coins, for keeping militias, or for managing trade monopolies to massive corporations like the Dutch East India Company with its thousands of ships. These privileges gave such corporations the power to conduct – in the true sense of the word – their wars. Even in the Dutch cities often military guards did not report to the local authorities, but were enterprises in their own right. One such corps, which was commanded by Captain Frans Banninck Cocq in Amsterdam, became universally famous, because Rembrandt immortalized it pictorially in one of his most famous paintings, the so-called *Night Watch*.

Against the backdrop of all this warfare and although no less involved in it than others, the small country of the young Dutch Republic with its independent Seven United Provinces lived a Golden Age or “Gouden eeuw”. As new forms of business were conducted in foreign lands and as the stock exchange was invented, the economic powers and the influence of the corporations managed in the same way to transfer hostilities with few exceptions outside of the country. It benefited, nevertheless, at the same time from the wars thanks to its arms trade and its leading production of canons and firearms. The slave trade of the Dutch West India Company (WIC) was a further main source of huge amounts of income. With the republican form of government, Calvinism as the state religion, a religious tolerance or acceptance with very few flaws, in particular regarding Catholics, and the increasing wealth of certain groups of citizens, the Dutch Republic established itself as an enclave in the midst of all the turmoil. Furthermore, an influx of refugees contributed to increasing prosperity, perhaps because they were integrated fast, up to the point that they could become proper citizens. Even if the country was mainly spared of direct fighting on its own soil, there were enormous discrepancies in the society. Thus, it was far from being a Golden Age for everybody. Mostly the lower ends of society suffered from the va-

rious epidemics, in particular the Black Death, which hit the country more than once during the 17th century. Rembrandt's *Rat Catcher* (cat. 38) might recall something of the circumstances.

Rembrandt never left this "golden" enclave; he actually even refused to visit Italy, which remained an unrivalled artistic landmark in his day. We have no comments from the artist himself, whether he was at all interested in what was happening in the war-torn world outside his realm, whether he even reflected on it, or if, rather, he was totally indifferent. The Calvinist society inevitably had an impact on his painting: on the one hand, the Calvinists provided an utter lack of commissions for huge altarpieces, while on the other hand Rembrandt painted their portraits among the distinct citizens of Amsterdam, since he portrayed believers of all faiths and faith affiliations. The portrait of the famous *Staalmeesters* or the *Syndics of the Amsterdam Drapers' Guild* is a case in point: Two out of the five were Catholics, one was a Mennonite, one a Remonstrant, and the chairman was a Calvinist. Rembrandt furthermore loved the wealth, which he made shine amongst others and perhaps most impressively in his oriental creations, letting his phantasies float with great splendour. There is no firm hint, however, whether the elementary religious transformations of those days had an impact on him. He was exposed to them with his mother, who came from a Catholic background, and his Calvinistic father and was affected by them in his female relationships. Whether it was a conscious decision or just a coincidence, Rembrandt's etchings grew simply out of the misery of the war calamities. The prints, which the aforementioned French etcher Jacques Callot produced, employed all his virtuosity to confront the onlooker intensely with the disasters of the thirty years' war; precisely those attracted the young artist. It was indeed Callot's extremely explicit and shocking series of the *Misères de la Guerre*, which captured scenes his young Dutch colleague had never experienced anywhere himself, that stimulated the latter to engage in this technique and eventually become one of its greatest protagonists.

While Rembrandt has treated all topics in his graphic oeuvre, which appear also in his paintings, i.e. portraits, self-portraits, landscapes, mythological subjects, religious iconography etc., his focussed representations of beggars and the poor never entered his painted oeuvre. Callot also dwelled upon this particular topic in his prints, which fascinated the young Rembrandt right from his first etchings. Beggars, poor or crippled people appear in the context of particular iconographies like the *Return of the Prodigal Son*, the *Healing of the Lame Man at the Gate of the Temple in Jerusalem* (cats. 29, 37) etc., but Rembrandt makes these people a subject of their own right, even letting them speak by adding a word next to the figures. There has been a lot of discussion, whether Rembrandt is following the moralizing or even scornful medieval tradition. Since explicit evidence, to justify this interpretation, is lacking, the idea was put forward that he might follow

a concept, found in Luther's comment on the Gospel of St. John: "Beggars are we on earth (as Christ himself was)". In little genre scenes like *The Strolling Musicians*, *The Rat Catcher*, or *A Blind Hurdy Gurdy Player* (cats. 37, 38, 41), Rembrandt clearly went beyond the medieval tradition, and in his prints illustrated with great subtlety the role and behaviour of the poor in everyday life. The Calvinists had chosen the name Geuzen or Oude Geuzen, from the French word for beggars "les gueux", for their own, new political movement. In 1566 they formed a group under this name, which initiated the revolt against Philip II of Spain and his Catholic regime in the Netherlands. Its activities led eventually to the *Seven United Provinces* of the Dutch Republic with its protestant society and almost general religious tolerance.

His admired etchings made Rembrandt famous throughout the whole of Europe, as amongst others Guercino and Filippo Baldinucci confirm from the faraway Italy. Through the wide range of his religious iconography and his beggars alongside with his landscapes, mythologies, and portraits, Rembrandt conveyed the notions of his Dutch background way beyond his own personal environment, first in Leiden and later in Amsterdam, to a world that was alien to him, but attracted by his art and what it represented.

With his light, whether in black and white or in colour, Rembrandt creates a remoteness inside his works, to which the onlooker has access only through contemplation. Rembrandt's imagination is an inexhaustible font of variations from his *Three Crosses* (cat. 24) under their cone of rays coming from above, to his teaching Christ, shining from inside in his *Hundred Guilder Print* (cat. 22), or his *Faust* (cat. 56) surprised by a light apparition in front of the window, i.e. light before light, or his sparkling *Oriental Man with a Turban* in the painting (cat. 56). Today from our own troubled days, we are perhaps particularly primed to reflect on Rembrandt and the contrasts of his time. Our business-driven world is torn by terror and armed conflicts, allegedly religious, and the military activities are still being offshored to foreign countries. The state of affairs is generating refugees as well as impoverished people, and our post war European enclave begins to tumble and to forget the lessons of the 20th century. While the vigorous vitality of Rembrandt's person can still be gathered, history has obscured the great master's opinion on the political perspective of his times or even on the notion, whether he reflected on it at all. His art indicates not an intellectual, but an aesthetic approach, which offers inspiration. The effects and contrasts generated by the reformation have shattered Europe for centuries. We wanted to organize this exhibition as a reminder that like the reformation the present ecumenical perspective in its most wide-ranging sense has inevitably once again a European dimension — or today rather a global one. Under these auspices, we have joined our efforts from different countries and institutions, since we wanted to set a sign and reflect on these auspices through Rembrandt's wonderful images, which are not necessarily beautiful, but they are all a challenge still today.