

Rembrandt's Aristotle



Successful artists garner public adoration and fame, but such superficial recognition may insidiously corrode artistic integrity. In his essay, “Rembrandt's Aristotle,” from the larger collection *Rembrandt Studies*, Julius Held reveals Rembrandt's concern with the role of the artist in society. A dark, atmospheric painting of Aristotle placing his hand upon the bust of Homer seems imbued solely with painterly mysticism; Held, however, logically deconstructs the painting in order to inscribe clear significance into the canvas. Through thorough research, Held unveils Rembrandt's thesis-- the artist should elevate enduring artistic values over the more shallow rewards offered by society.

Beginning his analysis with background details, Held gives the reader a clear context in which to place the painting. For example, Held argues that the painting's accepted title, *Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer*, falls short in accurately describing the scene. In 1653, Rembrandt produced the painting of the physiognomist and

philosopher as the first of a series of three, for the Italian patron Ruffo. All of the paintings dealt with classical subject matter, with the final two titled Homer and Alexander the Great. Remarkably, Ruffo had little jurisdiction over the choice of subject matter, so Rembrandt assumed this role.

Held highlights Rembrandt's conscious choice of the Aristotle as the first painting; upon closer examination, a medallion with Alexander the Great engraved into it hangs off of Aristotle's great gold chain. Thus, the common name for the painting rings in the ear as a misnomer, for in actuality it contains three characters: Aristotle, Homer (as a widely known marble bust), and Alexander (on the medallion). Held, then, implies that the subjects for the final paintings, Homer and Alexander, emerge as important figures in the first piece-- a work which incorporates all three of the classical characters.

Rembrandt, the consummate humanist, felt a need to enliven Homer and Alexander in the later paintings because they reside in the first painting only in likeness.

After establishing the three characters who comprise the painting, and after grounding the painting in its historical context, Held proceeds to analyze the meaning behind the three men. They too retain a complex web of history and relationship. By Aristotle's time, the blind poet Homer already symbolized the timelessness of art. Though he sang of ancient civil strife, his words transcend death by their beauty. Held then uses the Poetics by Aristotle as confirmation of Aristotle's admiration for Homer, and Rembrandt most likely shared this affection. The bust of the blind poet rests in Aristotle's library. Aristotle places his right hand, the icon of moral choice, upon the gently glowing stone forehead of Homer, where Rembrandt places his signature. The left hand, a sinister icon, touches the medallion with Alexander's likeness. Aristotle taught Alexander the

Great as a young man, only to later fall from the young prince's favor. The gold chain and medallion, a gift commonly given from royalty to show honor, contrasts the old bust. A flashy gift of faulty honor hangs from Aristotle, and the philosopher seems hardly enamored in it. Instead, he gazes inward like a blind man.

Bathed in melancholic black, Aristotle broods between these two poles. Held elaborates upon the tradition of the hand touching the head, in the form of either a skull or a bust, by presenting the image's symbolic place in art history. Most paintings of this subject matter relate to death and time. Gold chains, meanwhile, were gifts to great artists and the famous. The Italian painter Veronese and Peter Paul Rubens received such gifts, and occasionally painters would portray themselves proudly wearing the gift. But the chain carries the added metaphorical weight of servitude. Held notes that Sir Thomas More, the man for all seasons, wrote of the paradox of the gold chain in *Utopia*. A duality now emerges: wealth and ostentatious fames versus equanimity and endurance.

Here, Held begins to explore autobiographical detail in order to more robustly explain the painting. Autobiography often becomes subjective and difficult to prove, so Held saves it primarily for last. He has already established the reader's confidence in him through his reliance on meticulous research.

Yet many facts of Rembrandt's life closely mirror the burgeoning theme of the painting. Like Aristotle, Rembrandt fell out of favor with a member of the government, Secretary of the Stadholder, Constatijne Huygens. And Rembrandt, like Homer before him, ignited the ire of critics who desired cleaner, more agreeable art. At certain times during his life, Rembrandt tasted the fleeting nature of material success. Laboring to satisfy the requests of wealthy patrons, Rembrandt felt the weight of the metaphorical

gold chain. Near the conclusion of the paper, Held includes Rembrandt's famous quote, "When I want to relax my mind, I choose freedom, not honor." In the painting, the bust of Homer glows at a higher ground, beneath the right hand, while the chain rests in the dark near the left hand. Rembrandt suggests that artistic beauty transcends the material concerns of the world.

In his essay "Rembrandt's Aristotle," Julius Held dissects a painting of a moody, even enigmatic scene. He begins by entrenching the painting in its historical context. He encounters misconceptions which obscure the true meaning of the painting, and then establishes the real concern of the work. Aristotle not merely contemplates the bust of Homer, but broods in the presence of two opposing elements. Homer represents timeless art, while Alexander's chain represents material success. Through placement in the composition and iconography, Rembrandt implies that the great thinker Aristotle has already chosen the route of most honor. Held then reminds the reader that Rembrandt celebrated integrity over immediate acceptance, and today his art transcends his life and times.

