



Rembrandt: The Descent from the Cross

Not a bad 'Impression': a fine 'Rembrandt' Print in McGill's Collection

by Maria L. Brendel

In 1919 McGill received a seventeenth century print from the estate of the Reverend Canon Thomas W. Mussen: The Descent from the Cross. In recent years this print has been dismissed by a local print dealer, on unspecified grounds, as a "bad impression, not by Rembrandt." This article contradicts the dealer's opinion and relates McGill's fine print (etching) to the plate from which two impressions were taken – one in the British Museum, London, the other in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Both have been directly linked to the Dutch baroque artist, Rembrandt Harmenz van Rijn, by their respective museum print experts and authenticated by the Amsterdam based committee, the Rembrandt Research Project.¹

En 1919, la succession du Révérend Canon Thomas W. Mussen donne à McGill une gravure du XVII^e siècle intitulée The Descent from the Cross (Descente de la Croix). Un marchand d'art a récemment dit de cette gravure, sans aucun motif, qu'elle était une "très mauvaise impression [et ne pouvait] être attribuée à Rembrandt". Cet article réfute l'opinion du marchand et met en lumière le lien qui existe entre la gravure en possession de McGill et la plaque à partir de laquelle deux impressions ont été tirées, l'une figurant au British Museum à Londres et l'autre au Metropolitan Museum of Art à New York. Toutes deux ont été directement attribuées au peintre baroque hollandais Rembrandt (Harmenszoon van Rijn) par les spécialistes de ces deux établissements. Elle a par ailleurs été authentifiée par le Rembrandt Research Project¹, à Amsterdam.

Impression

The Descent from the Cross

Etching and burin

52.2 cm × 41 cm

Inscription: *Rembrandt f. cum priyul 1633*

Watermark to be determined by radiography

As rumor has it, potent but often false, I was told that the Rare Books and Special Collections at McGill University has a bad print, an imitation after Rembrandt, not worth mentioning. Swayed at first by rumor, visualizing a 'fake,' nearly undecipherable and full of ink spots printed from a botched copper plate, I did not initially insist on looking at it. How-

ever, after considering that even a bad impression from that time has research potential and historical authority, I decided to view the print.²

"Excitement" is insufficient to convey the experience of seeing this large, visually demanding impression for the first time. *The Descent from the Cross* is a familiar composition, known from Rembrandt's painting of the famous passion cycle, obtained by Prince Frederick Henry of Orange during the 1630s (now in Munich: Alte Pinakothek). The tableau *Descent from the Cross* had a particular meaning for Rembrandt. It won him the royal patronage for which most artists were striving at that time, but only few gained. This painting caught the eye of the Prince's secretary, Constantijn Huygens, who initiated the commission for six ensuing paintings that make up the passion cycle.³ (This information

is derived from seven letters Rembrandt wrote to Huygens, the artist's *only* known correspondence). To turn the painted composition into an impression was an established practice, especially of renowned works. Italian and German artists employed the graphic medium to make their works known. Engravings/etchings protected the authenticity of pictures - often copied via painting - and ensured a greater distribution, serving as advertisements for an artist's work, especially at the beginning of a career. In the Holland of Rembrandt, prints found a new circulation terrain due to increased prosperity among the populace which resulted in an expanding art market.⁴ Nadine M. Orenstein, print curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, who published a critical analysis of the New York 'Descent' in 1995, remarked "the grand scale and heavy finish of [this] etching, which stands apart of Rembrandt's characteristically small, loosely drawn prints of the 1630s, reflects this purpose"⁵: circulation.

For connoisseurs and/or collectors, works in printed form were a means to afford what was otherwise out of reach and out of sight. Once a painting entered a private collection, irrespective of how much it may have been temporarily part of contemporary discussion - due to the work being seen in workshops by collaborators, assistants and visitors - it was no longer accessible for viewing. And only a few people could pay the hefty sums Rembrandt asked for his paintings, fees which even the Prince had to negotiate.⁶ The graphic medium remedied this situation. Rembrandt's colleague in the South (Flanders), Peter Paul Rubens, fully utilized the graphic arts. His famous tableau "The Descent from the Cross," (1611-12) was widely known only because it circulated in printed form. Rembrandt followed suit, publishing his impression with the privilege and protection of the state, a sort of copyright - indicated on the lower part of the print *cum privilegio*.⁷ Yet, unlike Rubens, who hired professional engravers (his 'Descent' was engraved by Lucas Vosterman) for a type of art clearly tedious, painstaking and time consuming,⁸ Rembrandt was attracted to the laboriousness of the medium, experimenting with etching and challenging the technique.

Interestingly, Rembrandt's etched oeuvre were widespread already in the eighteenth century. They were not only collected by connoisseurs, they were sought by artists as aids in the practice of their

craft.⁹ Two sheets of sketches after etchings by Rembrandt are in the Yale Centre for British Art (New Haven: Mellon Collection). In these, the painter Joshua Reynolds exercised figural and facial expressions using the Dutch artist's self portrait and Rembrandt's young son, Titus, as his models.¹⁰

Etching

An etching is a kind of engraving in which the design is incised in a layer of wax or varnish on a copper plate. The parts of the plate left exposed are then etched - slightly eaten away - by the acid into which the plate is immersed after incising. Etching is one of the most facile of the graphic arts and the one most capable of subtleties of line and tone.¹¹

Rembrandt's contribution to the graphic arts was already recognized in the seventeenth century by the Florentine art consultant and art historian Filippo Baldinucci. He wrote in 1686 of Rembrandt's "most bizarre manner which he invented for engraving on copper with acid, all his own, neither used again by others, nor seen again."¹² Prior to Baldinucci, a British engraving-etching manual of 1660 makes mention of a novelty "The Ground of Rinebrant of Rein."¹³ In contrast to the professional French etcher Monsieur Callot, who used hard copper plates,¹⁴ the Dutch artist used a softer ground which allows greater freedom in drawing lines while also softening lines, resulting in subtle nuances and expressive power - visible in McGill's *Descent*.

Lover of Art

It must have been the drama, the appeal to emotion so well expressed in *The Descent*, that attracted Thomas W. Mussen to the impression. Mussen was "a man of culture and erudition, and a lover of Art," to use J. Douglas Borthwick's words. He possessed, as Borthwick wrote, "a large collection of coins and engravings by the old Masters, also a rare collection of books. These he got by great diligence and economy."¹⁵

Thomas W. Mussen (1832-1901) was born in Montreal and studied at McGill. After graduating, in 1856 he went on a grand European tour, returning in 1858.¹⁶ His travel account, given to McGill together with the *Decretia gratian*, a digest of Eccle-

siastical Law, records a visit to a Paris book dealer.¹⁷ It may also have been in Paris where he obtained the *Descent from the Cross*. Paris, at that time, was a storehouse for Rembrandt oeuvre.¹⁸ Whatever the case, *The Descent from the Cross* arrived in Montreal folded, but in superb condition. Folding the large print horizontally must have been necessary for the voyage. Surprisingly, the composition on the recto (front) does not suffer from the fold. In fact, the fold can be noticed only from the back (verso). Originally, the impression was on a thin sheet of paper, like the Metropolitan Museum 'Descent,' but backed by a second sheet (likely added in the late seventeenth century) in order to stabilize the work. This facilitated the fold and ultimately the journey across the Atlantic.

Identical Prints

Calling on Gary Tynski, Curator of Prints in McGill's Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, we compared the impression to good photographic reproductions of the prints in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and London's British Museum. The three prints are identical in size, composition, technique and execution – except for slight variations in ink distribution, an occurrence contingent on manual application (ink is newly applied each time a sheet of paper is to be pulled from the plate). We concluded that all three impressions must derive from the same plate. (The British Museum has another impression of "The Descent," an earlier attempt in which Rembrandt experimented with both the composition and technique. However, the plate was unevenly bitten by the acid, and turned out not to be a success.)¹⁹

Seventeenth Century Paper

McGill's impression is on seventeenth century paper. This is the conclusion reached after examining the print together with Dr. Richard Virr, Curator of Manuscripts, McGill Rare Books and Special Collections, and after telephone-conferencing with Nadine M. Orenstein, in New York, with whom I discussed at some length the Metropolitan and McGill prints and their paper. McGill's *Descent* is printed on laid paper, used during the seventeenth century when paper was still hand pressed. Laid paper shows wire

marks which derive from the molds into which the cellulose mixture was placed. Interestingly, paper used at the time in Holland was most often imported from France or from the Far East and was often given Dutch watermarks.²⁰ Watermarks are distinct designs – grapes, fleur de lis, foolscap, coats of arms – which link paper to particular houses of production. Sometimes a watermark also indicated quality level.²¹ Watermarks are usually seen when the sheet of paper is held against a strong light (the New York 'Descent' has a grape watermark). Dr. Virr and I looked for this distinct feature but could not discern it in McGill's impression. Our investigation was hampered by the second sheet onto which *The Descent* has been placed. However, what human eyes cannot detect, beta- or X-radiography can determine – a means currently used in the study of impressions from that period.²²

Large Impression

The many Rembrandt's prints in circulation today are much smaller – at times minute – and display a greater sketchiness and decreased linearity, especially those produced in the 1640s and 1650s when he was even more experimental as an etcher. Large Rembrandt impressions – of which there are far fewer – have often been kept in private collections or given to institutions for academic and aesthetic purposes, as those in the present discussion. Within Rembrandt's own historical position, the imposing size of *The Descent* articulates his transcendence from mere craftsman to artist. He was recognized by the nobility. This is particularly relevant in comparison to Rubens, who had enjoyed royal patronage for decades (most particularly during the 1620s and 1630s) and with it prestige, social mobility and financial security, a model example for Rembrandt. F.W.E. Holstein has advanced the view that Ruben's print, likely known to Rembrandt only through the impression, was a major influence on his painting.²³ The Dutch artist, as is evident, based his painted composition, in part, on that of the Fleming, producing his own impression, also. For the print, however, Rembrandt opted for large proportions and intensified dramatic expressions, setting himself apart from Rubens.

Particular Spirit

In 1662 John Evelyn, in his *Sculptura*, noted that "the incomparable Reinbrand's etchings and gravings are of a particular spirit."²⁴ The particular spirit lies in the technical ability with which Rembrandt achieves a moment of dramatic intensity, capturing the beholder's attention. In addition, *The Descent* is directly accessible to the viewer, emphasized in a number of ways.

First, his figures are not idealized, muscular with heroic proportions like those of Rubens, who was much under the spell of antiquity. Unlike Rubens, Rembrandt never went south of the Alps on the grand Italian tour and was never exposed to antique sculptures and Italian Renaissance art first-hand (only through graphic reproductions). He stayed home and it served him well. His unidealized figures, homely settings and stress on human emotions carry the attraction viewers have toward his art, initiating a dialogue between artwork and beholder.

Second, the effects in his tableaux of colour and thick paint applications are replaced in his etchings by the play of light and shadows. For example, rays of supernatural light fall onto a 'human' Christ, illuminating a face marked by pain – a moving expression fascinatingly rendered in a difficult medium. The light suddenly stops on the ladder leaning against the cross. It peters out to the left, highlighting the visage of the turbaned gentleman, Joseph of Arimathea, into whose tomb the corpus was laid. Light is used as a narrative device, acting like words in a text.

Third, Rembrandt focuses less on the pictorial and more on narrative elements, emphasized further through the figures' postures, facial expressions and their distribution within the composition. Repeatedly, in his works figures are included in the margins, absorbed in something else, distant in their placement and unaware of the main event. In *The Descent*, two seated gentlemen, at the very left of the composition, one wearing a top-hat, appear to be involved in a conversation – ignorance or comic relief?

Fourth, McGill's *The Descent* is not just black and white. It consists of a multitude of tones of grays as well as whites, which with a sophisticated employment of line – cross hatching, straight and curvilinear lines, shallow and deep cutting – give both

emotional and spatial depth to this setting. Depth in space is most particularly underlined on the sides where a townscape is seen, set back illusionistically through lighter tones of gray. The central darker area in the centre front, especially the area under the cross, and the placement of a kneeling figure at the right viewing the event, are compositional devices bringing the scene outward toward the viewer, while leading the eye and ultimately the beholder into the fictional space.²⁵

Another device employed here to engage the viewer is a figure's gaze, making eye contact with the beholder. This feature was denounced by Christopher White, who was evidently taken by this image of *The Descent* and analyzed the print at great length. White described the figure standing on the ladder looking out, "with features resembling Rembrandt, a vulgar touch and distracting."²⁶

Collaborate efforts

Rembrandt, who was twenty-seven years old in 1633, the date of both painting and etching, was gaining fame. But at this time he must have sought help and advice from engravers. Ludwig Münz attributes a large number of prints to a combination of master and assistants, among them *The Descent from the Cross*. This counter-argues the opinion of C. White who credits Rembrandt alone for the execution.²⁷ McGill's impression appears to show more than one hand and it is very likely that, at this early stage in his career, Rembrandt worked with the experienced engraver Jan Van Vliet, as N. Orenstein suggests. The following excerpt from Orenstein's close examination and assessment of the New York 'Descent' is worth including here, for it deepens our understanding and appreciation of McGill's impression:

Clearly the Descent was etched in several stages; successive layers of drawing, hatching, and redrawing are visible throughout. Certain passages of hatching have been mechanically applied, while others, which can frequently be discerned underneath the heavy layers of hatching display the spontaneity typical of Rembrandt's lines. Large areas of the sky and the buildings in the left background, for example, are covered with repetitive diagonal hatching done with the burin, the tool of the professional en-

graver. The original execution of the buildings underneath the hatching, however, is lively and loosely sketched with thin etched lines, a stylistic characteristic associated with the master. Elsewhere thin lines are retraced with thicker, heavy-handed etched ones, such as those of the outlines of the brocaded cloak on the ground in the center. And strokes too uniform for Rembrandt's hand are in evidence in other parts of the composition: [like] the parallel lines that define the shimmering tunic of the man standing to the left of the ladder. This alternately spontaneous and mechanical handling and re-handling can be explained only if the etching is considered the result of a series of interchanges between Rembrandt and another artist. Rembrandt must initially have sketched much of the composition onto the plate, but another hand seems to have filled in and reworked many areas under his direction.²⁸

Collaborate efforts were normal workshop procedures in seventeenth century Holland, a fact increasingly accepted in scholarship, at times even emphasized but unfortunately vehemently rejected by dealers. For too long academic interaction with Rembrandt's art and studio dynamics were based not on actual practices but on modern interpretations. The thesis went like this: Rembrandt worked without pupils and/or assistants; he was the lonely genius who would create only in isolation, tortured by his muse. Acceptance of collaboration is very recent and contrary to scholarship produced during the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century when the focus, obsessively, was on one master, one name, one author. This persistence was a lingering shadow of the nineteenth century Romantic cult of the genius, who was perceived as an *outcast* of sorts. Clearly this was a type of scholarship that suspended knowledge for belief, in which Rembrandt was caught up for too long at the cost of many contemporary masters, their contribution and their art.

Authorship is an exclusionary concept. "Authorship," as J. Culler puts it, "is not given but produced; what counts as authorship is determined by interpretive strategies."²⁹ Our interaction, our interpretative engagement with the author(s) has to change, giving a greater latitude to the creative forces that shape an artwork and accepting the truth that an artist did not, could not, work in isolation,

especially not one with the prolific output of Rembrandt. We have to keep in mind that his large oeuvre includes paintings and drawings in addition to etchings.

The quotation mark in which Rembrandt's name is set in the title of this paper is therefore not a sign of uncertainty of attribution. Quite the contrary, it is to link Rembrandt's name directly to the work, but to also pay tribute to the labour, the contribution of the other(s) for whom names are still being sought.

Notes

1. The impression is discussed in Corpus II, closely associated with the compositional development of the Munich painting: *The Descent from the Cross*. J. Bruyn, B. Haak, S.H. Levie, P.J.J. Van Thiel, E. Van De Wetering in collaboration with L. Peese Binkhorts-Hoffschelte and J. Vis, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings II, 1631-1634* (Dordrecht and Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers), 1982, 278-287.

2. To Nadine M. Orenstein, print curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, I extend my thanks for enthusiastically offering me her time and expertise. Thanks are due to Dr. Richard Virr, curator of manuscripts, and Gary Tynski, print curator, both of McGill's Department of Rare Books and Special Collections. R. Virr kindly pointed me to bibliographic sources and to McGill's *T.W. Mussen File*. My appreciation is extended also to Andrea Fitzpatrick for her editing skills. Special thanks go to Dr. Hans Möller, founder and first editor of *Fontanus*, who shared my enthusiasm for the print.

3. Rembrandt painted this image on panel (like Rubens' 'Descent from the Cross'), although the other tableaux of the Passion cycle are painted on canvas. This may indicate that his *Descent* was initially conceived as an independent work. Christopher Brown, Jan Kelch & Pieter van Thiel, *Rembrandt: the Master & his Workshop* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press and National Gallery Publications), 1991, 156-160 (Henceforth referred to as Brown et al).

4. For the art market in Holland see: Svetlana Alpers, *Rembrandt's Enterprise. The Studio and the Market* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press),

1988, 88 ff. and Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches. An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (London: Fontana Press), 1987, 290 ff. and Neil de Marchi and Hans J. van Miegrot, "Art, Value and Market Practices in the Netherlands in the Seventeenth Century," *The Art Bulletin*, September, 1994.

5. Nadine M. Orenstein, "Rembrandt's Prints and the Question of Attribution," pp. 201–102 and catalogue entry "The Descent from the Cross," pp. 228–229, both in *Rembrandt/Not Rembrandt in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: Aspects of Connoisseurship*, vol. II (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Distributor), 1995; and Christopher White, *Rembrandt as an Etcher. A study of the artist at work* (London: A Zwemmer Ltd.), 1969, vol. 2, for reproduction of prints in the British Museum pp. 22–24, and vol. 1 for text, pp. 33–36.

6. Prince Frederic Hendrik of Orange did not pay the full price Rembrandt asked. Brown et al, 156.

7 *The Descent from the Cross* together with *Christ before Pilate* – perhaps pendant pieces – are the only impressions by Rembrandt with the inscription *cum pryo*, or *cum privile*, as N. Orenstein noted, 228.

8. For Rubens' engraved 'Descent from the Cross' see White, vol. 2, 22 or J. Bruyn et al, *Rembrandt Corpus II*, A 65.

9. Jeroen Boomgard and Robert W. Scheller, "A Delicate Balance: a brief Survey of Rembrandt Criticism," in Brown et al, 107.

10. Reynolds' sheets are reproduced on page 108, figures 135 & 136 in Brown et al.

11. G. Tansey, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*, 8th edition (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), 1986, 978.

12. F. Baldinucci, *Cominciamento e progresso dell' arte in rame cole vite molti de' piu eccelenti Maestri della stessa Professione* (1686), 2nd ed. 1767, 169, cited by White, 9. Baldinucci helped form the drawing collection of Cardinal Leopoldo de Medici, purchasing paintings for Duke Cosimo III de Medici. *The Oxford Companion to Art*, ed. Harold Osborne (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1970, 102.

13. *The whole Art of Drawing, Painting and Etching*, authors are not cited, (London, 1660), known from Cochin's edition of 1758 of Bosse's *Traité des Maniers de Graver*, cited by White, 12.

14. White, 12.

15. Reverend J. Douglas Borthwick, *History of the Diocese of Montreal 1850–1910* (Montreal: John Lovell & Son, Limited), 1910, 120–122. R. Virr referred me to this source.

16. Borthwick, 120.

17. *T.W. Mussen File*, Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University.

18. For information on art dealings see Jan Kelch, *Bilder im Blickpunkt: Der Mann mit dem Goldhelm* (Berlin: Gemäldegalerie), 1986, 11 ff.

19. Orenstein, 228. For the reproduction of this plate see White, vol. 2, plate 23.

20. For some of his smaller impressions Rembrandt turned to Japanese papers, reaching Holland from the Dutch trading post at Nagasaki through the port of Batavia in Java. It was known as Indian paper as it came through the Dutch East India company. White, 13–14.

21. The Plantin publishing house in Antwerp, for instance, was ordering paper by the watermark and size. Philip Gaskell, *An Introduction to Bibliography* (Winchester: Oak Knoll), 1994, 61.

22. Orenstein, 203.

23. F.W.E. Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts, ca. 1450–1700* (Amsterdam), 1949, for Rembrandt's prints see vols. XLII (text), p 31 and XIX (plates), compiled by Christopher White and Karel G. Boon; cited by Orenstein, 228.

24. cited by White, in his Introduction, p. ii.

25. White, vol. 1, 36.

26. White, vol. 1, 36.

27. Ludwig Münz, *A critical Catalogue of Rembrandt's Etchings* (London), 1952, 197–198 cited by White, 34.

28. Orenstein, 228.

29. Culler is referred to by Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History," *The Art Bulletin*, June, 1991, 181.