One Master Mines Another

By Jonathan Lopez

Amsterdam

Edgar Degas (1834-1917) was an artist of paradoxes. Renowned for his depictions of modern life—the ballet, the racetrack, the café-concert—he felt more at home than in the petit room of the Bibliothèque Nationale, where he spent hours on end making sketches after old etchings and engravings. "No art was ever more spontaneous than mine," he once wrote in a letter to a friend. "What I do is the result of reflection and study of the great masters."

The current exhibition at the Rijksmuseum offers a focused look at what Degas learned from a specific great master: Rembrandt. In 1889-90, before he returned to Paris, Degas saw the paintings of Rembrandt and the printmaker Joseph Tourn. Degas was a revere symbol of artistic individualism, due in part to his outsider status in the canon of art history as taught at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts.

Instructors at the Ecole accorded a measure of respect to Rembrandt, especially for the deep humanity of his work, but they did not encourage students to imitate him. Degas's use of broken, sketchy outlines to suggest atmospheric effects and his tendency to define forms through chiaroscuro—dramatic contrasts of light and shade—plagued him starkly at odds with the classical mode of drawing favored by the Ecole. French academic tradition held that Italian Renaissance artists like Raphael, whose ideas lines seemed to cove up ideas of form and void, furnished the best examples for study.

The printmaker Tourn, who collected etchings by Rembrandt and brought a small printing press with him to Italy, inspired Degas to try making prints in the Rembrandtian manner, as three etchings on the exhibition's first wall make clear. Degas's faithful copy of the 1873 Rembrandt etching "Young Man in a Velvet Cap" juxtaposed with the original, and nearby hangs an etched portrait that Degas made of Tourn in much the same spirit. Tourn's face is cast in shadow, adopts a pose similar to the figure in the Rembrandt etching—seated, with arms folded, looking away from a window—and even sports a velvet cap. At this early date, Degas's craftsmanship lacked some of the freedom and authority it would later attain, and if therefore suffers somewhat in a direct comparison with Rembrandt. Nevertheless, the dense thickets of crooked lines in Rembrandt's etchings fully exploit the expressive possibilities of chiaroscuro. Degas defines the folds and creases of Tourn's coat with an almost mechanical system of crosshatching reminiscent of 17th-century line engraving. The mismatch between this funny technique and the larger drama of the image evidently bothered Degas; another work on view captures his attempts to remedy the problem.

In this c. 1886 reworking of the Tourn portrait, Degas used the original etching plate but left areas of excess ink as is during the printing process to create fields of shadow independent of the etched lines. The effect is intensely Rembrandtian, as the figure emerges from almost total darkness. Degas also used expressive inking on a self-portrait etching from this period, one of the most striking works in the show. Here, the young artist appears as a shadowy figure in a frock coat and broad-berimmed hat—a modern Frenchman thrust into the gloom of 17th-century Amsterdam by means of art historical homage.

While the case for Rembrandt's influence on Degas's etchings is clear and unassailably matters become more complex when one turns to the exhibition's four painted self-portraits by Degas—all of which date from just before or during the artist's Italian sojourn—when works actually draw inspiration from a wide variety of sources, not just Rembrandt. In the Degas self-portrait of c. 1857-58, lent by the Clark Art Institute, for example, one sees plain traces of Rembrandt in the deep shadows, in the intentionally unfinished details of the coat and shirt collar, and in the overall sense of role-playing—staid Degas wearing a jaunty red beret seems more than a bit theatrical. That said, this work's shadows are limp in a way that Rembrandt's seldom were, and Degas's cuing eyes and dreamy countenance have much in common with Raphael's self-portrait in the Uffizi. Without any picture by Rembrandt.

But part of Degas's genius, as curator Jenny Essayan takes pains to show, was an ability to appreciate and synthesize styles that might seem, at first glance, completely incompatible. "Van Dyck was a first-rate artist," Degas once wrote to Moreau. "Gio- giore also, Botticelli also, Van- tegna also, Rembrandt also, Car- paccio also..." Hardly a surprise, then, that the American collector Louise Havemeyer, wife of sugar tycoon H.O. Havemeyer, once remarked that "It takes special brain cells to appreciate De- gas."

The main accomplishment of this intelligent exhibition is to help those special brain cells perceive how Degas eventually sub- jected his fascination with Rem- brandt into a larger artistic project that melded a wide array of styles into a new style that owed as much to the past as to the present.

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