



Directed by Rembrandt in 10 images



Rembrandt as Director in the Spotlights

Rembrandt was a master storyteller, not with words but with images. To tell stories, he made use of techniques that were also used in the theatre, such as facial expressions, gestures, lighting, costumes, and accessories. In addition, he chose the best moment to depict: the moment of greatest tension, of ultimate suspense. This exhibition highlights, for the first time, Rembrandt's role as a director of his own artworks. And it reveals how 17th-century painters and theatre-makers were inspired by each other.

Directed by Rembrandt, it narrates the story of Rembrandt and the emerging theater scene in Amsterdam during his time. You will accompany him as he observes (street) theater, exploring his insights. Subsequently, we return to Rembrandt's studio to investigate the directing techniques he employed in depicting his own narrative presentations.

The exhibition, *Directed by Rembrandt*, will be open from 2 March to 26 May 2024 in the Rembrandt House Museum. The press preview will take place on Tuesday 27 February 2024. For further information, please contact our Press Office via press@rembrandthuis.nl



Seven Directing Techniques

Just like theatre directors, Rembrandt manipulated all elements in his artworks at his discretion, aiming to depict a story as captivatingly and convincingly as possible. The main directing techniques he used are:

- Choosing the Right Moment
- Facial Expression
- Hand Gestures
- Costumes and Accessories
- Posture
- Lighting
- Composition

A painter can use the expression on a figure's face to tell an important part of a story. For this, Rembrandt studied actors in the theatre. He himself also acted in front of the mirror in his studio.

Rembrandt, Self-portrait, study of surprise, 1630

Etching, state 1(1)

Rembrandt House Museum, Amsterdam



The Scandal

The biblical character Susanna is about to take a bath. Two important men, elders, spy on her from the bushes. They whisper that they want to have sex with her. Susanna is startled. Rembrandt shows the 'peripety' of the moment: the turning point in the story is represented by Susanna turning away. Her eyes meet ours, and through that gaze, Rembrandt involves us in her predicament. The directing here is masterful because it does not get much more uncomfortable than this.

Rembrandt, *Susanna*, 1636

Oil on panel

Mauritshuis, The Hague



Terrible Lie

This painting is about a terrible lie. On the right is Potiphar, a courtier to the pharaoh. He listens to his wife telling him that she was almost raped by Joseph. In reality, however, she herself accosted him. The shock on the face of Joseph—on the left—speaks volumes. In the Bible story, Joseph is not featured in this scene, but Rembrandt, as director of his own story, added him to clarify that a great injustice is being done.

This painting was created by Rembrandt in the Rembrandt House and is returning for the first time to the place where it was made almost 400 years ago.

Rembrandt, Potiphar's Wife Accuses Joseph, 1655

Oil on canvas

Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin



The Perfect Turban

According to several of Rembrandt's pupils, he could spend two days winding a turban. Apparently, he took time to assemble various parts of a costume before beginning to paint or draw them. He probably took similar care to prepare this study of an old man. Rembrandt made this study in preparation for depicting the high priests in his painting *Judas Repentant* (1629). He wanted to know exactly how the light falls on the back of the head of a man wearing a turban.

Rembrandt, *Study of an old man with turban*, , 1626-7

Oil on panel

The Kremer Collection

Four Stories, One Image

Usually, artworks depict a single moment, a single scene. This is the same in theatre, where the unity of time, place, and action is a golden rule. But, in this etching, Rembrandt brought together four moments from a single Bible story as if they had taken place at the same time. Like a director, he placed his figures in a well-balanced *troep* (group), alternated their height (*sprong*), and added plenty of *verscheydenheydt* (variety). The image is also full of drama and reminds us of *the tableaux vivants* that were popular in the *Schouwburg theatre*.

Rembrandt, Christ preaching (The Hundred Guilder Print), c. 1648

Etching, drypoint and burin, state 2(2)

Rembrandt House Museum, Amsterdam



Quacksalver in the Street

In Rembrandt's time, you could see several types of theatre in the streets of Amsterdam. The annual autumn fair, in particular, was great fun. Musicians, quacksalvers, and traveling theatre groups put on their shows. Rembrandt, too, went to see them.

Rembrandt must have seen this quacksalver in the street, and without preparation, he drew this remarkable portrait of him. The quacksalver is standing on a raised platform and, with his hand on his hip, looks confident. Rembrandt managed to depict the invisible: the spoken word. The open mouth and outstretched arm of the man indicate that he is in the middle of his nonsense story.

Rembrandt, A quacksalver in front of a board on a stage with a parrot on his shoulder, c. 1636

Pen and ink

Albertina, Vienna



Men Playing Women

The Netherlands' first theatre opened in Amsterdam on 3 January 1638. From then on, almost every *Amsterdammer* could go to the theatre for an entrance fee. Performances were staged twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays.

The first play performed at the *Schouwburg* theatre was Joost van den Vondel's *Gysbreght van Aemstel*. Rembrandt was in the audience and drew this female character in action. It looks like the actor was a man. Women were not allowed to perform on stage until 1655. The actor may have worn gloves to camouflage his masculine hands.

Rembrandt, Study of an actor in a female role (Badeloch?), c. 1636-39
Pen and ink, brown wash, on red prepared paper
Museum der Bildenden Künste, Leipzig



Actor and Innkeeper

Rembrandt also visited the Amsterdam *Schouwburg theatre*. Proof of this is the drawings he made 'after life,' i.e., on the basis of his own observations. He especially liked zooming in on actors. He drew one actor in particular several times: Willem Ruyter.

Willem Ruyter was an impressive man. He had a striking appearance and could single-handedly command the entire stage. He was the star performer of the new *Schouwburg theatre* and was paid 1.5 guilders per show. This was a relatively large amount, but more was needed to make ends meet. For that reason, Ruyter also worked as an innkeeper.

Rembrandt, *The Actor Willem Ruyter in the Role of a Farmer, with a Study of his Face and a Person with a Beer Pitcher*, ca. 1638. Tekening, Victoria and Albert Museum, Londen



The Miser Pantalone

Pantalone is a famous Italian character. Pantalone is a frustrated character who thinks money can buy you everything. At the same time, though, he is a miser who only spends money if he has no other choice. Rembrandt probably thought Pantalone was funny because of his costume, accessories, and behavior.

Pantalone may be an old man, but he walks fast and talks while gesticulating wildly. The only way he can keep his hands under control is to put them behind his back. This is exactly what Rembrandt depicted: his Pantalone uses one hand to gesticulate whilst keeping the other behind his back.

Rembrandt, Actor in the role of Pantalone, c. 1636

Pen and ink, brown wash

Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg





Act yourself & slow watching

What Rembrandt did, we do too. Everyone creates pictures and videos for social media these days. You choose your moment, your expression, your gestures, and your clothes. You make a composition, if only by selecting a background. It is all visual storytelling. And you are the director.

In the exhibition, there are various interactive spots where visitors have the opportunity to get hands-on, engage in acting, and learn from Rembrandt. Additionally, several artworks feature a slow-watching multimedia tour where the visitor is guided in observing Rembrandt's meticulous direction – much like a guided meditation.