

Rembrandt van Rijn, Lucretia, 34.19

Questions:

1. Please take a couple of moments to view this picture in its entirety. What do you first notice about this painting? What do you see that makes you say that?
2. How did Rembrandt make his Lucretia appear vulnerable? What do you see that makes you say that? Any other ways?
3. What could be the purpose of her pulling on the cord? Having yanked it with the last bit of vitality, does Rembrandt imply that she closes the curtain after her final performance or does she call for servants to dress her body in death?
4. What virtues/attributes would you assign to this Lucretia?
5. How does this painting differ from the last-The Penitent Magdalen or Anna Bruchner? How is it similar?

Main Points:

1. The glow that emanates from the knife wound represents an innocence-Lucretia understands and accepts martyrdom. Lucretia's FACE and HANDS. One side of her face is bathed in light while the other side is in shadow except for a startling contrast on her cheek. We are drawn in by this effect. We are drawn to Lucretia's suffering. Light catches her shadowed cheek like a tear. A daub of pink glistens on her knife. Her knife and the cord she is about to pull (Is she pulling the cord to pull the curtain on her last act? As in a play? We see action and are drawn in. However, there is an aura of privacy derived from her averted eyes and her slighted tilted head. STRONG HIGHLIGHTS and deep shadows are used to further enhance the mood. Dressed in a gauzy white gown, covered by a light green robe and a heavy gold mantle (emphasizing her smallness and vulnerability), she holds a dagger in her right hand and tugs at a nearby bell chord with her left. Tears well in her sad brown eyes. This is the face of despair. The important details such as her face, hands, wound and dagger are highlighted for immediate attention and all else is left in shadow. Rembrandt has pared away all else in the room and left the psychological aspects for us. Lucretia completely fills the picture frame and is shown close to the frame. All the tragedy and drama are concentrated on the expression of Lucretia's face-the profound sadness. Rembrandt painted two versions of Lucretia in his lifetime. (The first, slightly earlier version resides in Washington and shows Lucretia about to stab herself. Her decision to end her life has already been made.) Rembrandt combined drama and individuality into a solitary moment of great psychological intensity.

2. The background on Lucretia –the story. According to legend, Lucretia, niece of the ancient Roman King Tarquin was raped by her husband’s friend, Sextus, the son of the king. He initially attempted to seduce her by promising marriage and when that failed he threatened to kill her slave and Lucretia, making it appear that she had been unfaithful to her husband. The next morning she called for her husband and her father to pledge an oath of revenge and then she committed suicide (to restore her family’s honor). A revolt was led against the Tarquins which resulted in their overthrow and the establishment of Rome.
3. The psychological background: Other artists who chose to paint Lucretia, chose to depict her as a sensuous voluptuous beauty, vastly different than the Lucretia painted by Rembrandt. (See attached pieces.) And Rembrandt rarely chose medieval themes and when he did, he rarely chose the mythical strains buried in historical accounts. IN this Lucretia, she is fully clothed emphasizing her chastity. She appears innocent full of sorrow and despair –this is a true tragedy.
4. To what degree did personal circumstances influence his choice of a young woman committing suicide? His wife, Saskia died at 29, in 1642 after a long illness (probably TB) after giving birth to their son, Titus. (He and Saskia had previously lost three children within their first three months of life. Rumbartus born in 1635 lived 2 mos., Cornelia born in 1638 lived 2 weeks and Cornelia born in 1640 lived 2 weeks.) This was also the year in which Rembrandt’s Night Watch was painted. He also began his long descent into financial difficulty. His faithful companion Hendrikkje Stossel who became his muse and his lifelong companion around 1649 (at which point she was described as a spinster at age 23) died in 1663. For Rembrandt , the death of his loved ones was unexpected and a source of great loneliness. His first Lucretia now in residence at the National Gallery in Washington was painted in 1664. The second, the Lucretia on view at the MIA was painted in 1666.

BIOGRAPHY:

Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn was born in 1606, one of ten children of a miller and the daughter of a prosperous baker. He was the second youngest child. (three of the ten died in infancy). He attended the Latin school in Leiden while his brothers leaned a trade. He was enrolled at the University in Leiden at age 14. Rather than become a scholar, he longed to be a painter and became a pupil of a local figure painter van Swanenburgh who had lived and worked for many years in Italy. He entered into a 6 month apprenticeship with Pieter Lastman in Amsterdam who painted history paintings, something Rembrandt aspired to rather than landscapes, still-lives or portraits.

Rembrandt returned to Leiden in 1626 “to paint alone”. It was here that he invented “tronies”, a new type of portrait head that was a compromise between portraiture and history painting. Models, probably friends, relatives or other artists, were dressed in exotic costumes. Rembrandt had his models assume different poses and expressions. Many tronies previously believed painted by Rembrandt are now believed to have been copies by pupils, signed by Rembrandt as a guarantee that they had come from his studio. At the end of 1631, Rembrandt left Leiden for Amsterdam and abandoned once and for all the university town for the hustle and bustle of the commercial center. He lived with with the art dealer, Hendrick van Uylenburgh working in his studio and obtaining portrait

commissions as well as acting as a tutor to art students who attended his art academy. He met and eventually married the art dealer's niece Saskia. They eventually bought a house next door to van Uylenburgh. During this time aside from etchings and drawings, Rembrandt averaged one portrait painting per month. During this time, he painted Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp. He was also able to pursue some of his favorite subjects, episodes from classical antiquity and the Bible.

At the height of his fame, in 1640 or 41, he was commissioned to paint one of the great group portraits for the new hall of the Kloveniersdoeien (the arquebusiers' headquarters). He delivered the painting in 1642 and later that year in June his wife Saskia died after a lengthy illness, leaving him with his only child, Titus. He was at the height of his success. Geertge Dircx, the widow of a ship's bugler from Hoom entered his household as a nurse to young Titus. She must have felt that the relationship with Rembrandt was a permanent one because in 1648 she made a will leaving her possessions, including Saskia's jewelry to Titus. However, the following year Rembrandt made a separation agreement with her and settled a sum of money for her yearly maintenance allowance that she felt was not satisfactory resulting in her beginning legal proceedings against him. She achieved an increase in her allowance but Rembrandt and Dircx's brother colluded and had her confined to a reformatory. She tried unsuccessfully to be released in 1652 and was finally released in 1655, dying one year later.

Hendrickje Stoffels bore Rembrandt's daughter, Cornelia, in 1654. She continued as his muse and confidant. She was, however, called before the Dutch Reform Church and subjected to sexual shame and public exposure (as was Lucretia) but rather than be revenged by Rembrandt (as by Lucretia's kin), Rembrandt gave her suffering artistic expression. At this time, Rembrandt began to have financial difficulties and ceased to meet his mortgage payments.

Rembrandt painted very little after the Night Watch, which represented the officers and men of the civic militia under Capt. Frans B. Cocq and Lt. van Ruytenburch. During a restoration in 1975-6, it was discovered that the scene actually takes place in broad daylight. The fame of the painting and the artist is indicated by the fact that when the new Rijksmuseum was opened in 1885, the Night Watch room was considered the centerpiece of the building and the collection.

By 1652, Rembrandt appeared recovered from personal problems and was again doing portrait paintings but by 1656 he declared himself insolvent. He was forced to sell much of his collection of accumulated art as well as some of his own creation at very low prices. (He owned a large collection of prints and drawings by masters such as Durer, van Leyden, Titian, and Bruegel and drew inspiration from their work. He also had a large collection of art and curiosities, having become an auction addict, that included Japanese armour, Persian textiles, helmets, shadow puppets, etc., many of which he used as props in his paintings.) Just a year later, his assets would have earned him ten times as much. The house was also sold leaving Rembrandt, Cornelia and Titus renting a more modest house in a less affluent area. In 1660, the art business was transferred into the names of Titus and Hendrickje with Rembrandt becoming their employee. His relief in the arrangement allowed Rembrandt to continue painting and he retained his social position. Stoffels died in 1663 and at that point was described as the "wife of Rembrandt". (The first Lucretia was painted in 1664, the second at the MIA in 1666.)

After her death, Titus continued to manage Rembrandt's affairs. Titus married in 1668 but 6 months later died of the plague leaving a pregnant wife. Rembrandt died in 1669.

RESOURCES:

MIA Library has a great file on Lucretia

Bailey, Colin B., *Rembrandt and his School: Masterworks from the Frick and Luigi Collections*. New York: Frick Collection. 2011

Google Images

Hellbrunn Timeline of Art History

Oxford Art Online

Schama, Simon. *The Power of Art*, New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006

Van Eck, Xander, *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 143, No. 1182 (Sept., 2001), pp.585-587



Top: Lucretia by Lucas Cranach the Elder, 1533, German
Bottom: Lucretia by Joos van Cleve, 1525, Flemish



Top: Lucretia by Artemesia Gentileschi, 1621, Italian
Bottom: Lucretia by Rembrandt, 1666

