

Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal Son* [1668-9] is essentially a deeply introspective painting, the process of viewing the amalgam of sensitive paint strokes significantly bearing resemblance to our relationship with Christ. The Father reveals himself to us slowly; a grasp of Rembrandt's work is attained through a ruminative understanding and gradual realisation. He leads us through the painting to ultimately identify the themes hidden beneath the veneer of the identifiable narrative. As such, the parable of the Lost Son introduces the viewer to the painting.

The dark central void of immanent blackness draws the eye in to the centre of the painting. It both provides a loosely compositional model organising the figures according to Van Mander's principle of hierarchy, but moreover concerning the both painter's and the audience's search for truth. Rembrandt, the painter, explores this tenet not in terms of physiognomy (that is, the analytically evaluative study of characteristic facial features), but rather in pursuit of an ethereal "other dimension". To try and describe this "truth" or attribute any appropriately flagrant adjectives would only undermine both its authority within the painting, but also diminish its very ephemerality. It is this 'je ne sai quoi' (to describe it in rather crude terms) that maintains the potency of Rembrandt's great masterpiece, and is something shared in most of his works.

Rembrandt manifests this quality through the haziness of his brush stroke. There are no clearly definable fields of colour. Rather, the tones bleed into one another to establish a beautifully composite picture. This technique can perhaps best be seen in the late work *Simeon with the Christ Child in the Temple* [1666-9], the painted blindness of the old priest tragically pointing to Rembrandt's own gradual loss of sight. The comparison to Simeon brings to light the theme of touch too, with stiff hands his sole reconcilable tool assuring Christ's presence. The hands in the *Return of the Prodigal Son* also take centre stage: strong hands of compassion, of relief, of love. Warmth placed in welcome on the son's shoulders allows Rembrandt to illustrate how the broken son kneels before his father, united in the immeasurable grace received with his unworthiness, the generous wealth of the father's love with his own deep poverty, and the forgiving paternal hands providing relief from his destitution. A closer examination of the father's hands reveals their dual nature. His right looks like the gentle and caring hand of a female, his left revealing a steadfast and robust male strength. Rembrandt's father is universal, yet presents the fullness of God, the Father.

Chiaroscuro, the extremes of light and dark, is layered over the painting to highlight the central action. It works over the areas of colour to establish the piece as a work in practice of ranging tone. The undefined light source somewhat confuses the picture, however the prominence of the father and son remains. The father's hands, coupled with the crippling fall of the son betray an intense humility, in turn manifested by the quietly humble style of Rembrandt's brush stroke. The painting is not presentational or immediate; instead it is characterised by a subtle solitude. It is interesting to parallel the painting with Rembrandt's wider treatment of beggars. A frequent subject for the painter, his etchings urge us to notice that in human beings, no matter how afflicted and deprived, they still maintain a modicum of human dignity. His treatment of this subject assumes a new significance in *Self Portrait as a Beggar* [1630], as he gives his own face to a ragged, ill-shod beggar, miserably aware of his existence at the fringes of a society not his own to join.

Rembrandt, the man, undoubtedly painted the *Return of the Prodigal Son* as an exercise in personal reflection. It was completed towards the end of his life when he himself remained as a broken, poor, humbled character: he was alone, following the death of a dearly loved wife and subsequent death of his mistress. Some thirty years earlier he had painted himself with his wife in *Self Portrait with Saskia in the parable of the Prodigal Son* [1635], enjoying wine with seductive glances leaving the viewer clear to his intentions. The *Return of the Prodigal Son* sees Rembrandt's own return to the Father, accepting the benevolent and ever-giving grace of God, coming in humble servitude to Him.