



Figure 1

**REMBRANDT AND THE WATERLANDER MENNONITES**  
A paper presented by Kenneth Edmonds to the  
Study and Research Commission on Baptist Heritage and Identity  
Baptist World Alliance Gathering, Ede, Netherlands - July 29, 2009

Rembrandt was born in 1606 and died in 1669. He lived in the Dutch Golden Age and never travelled further than 60 miles from Amsterdam in his whole life.

Rembrandt is acknowledged as one of the greatest artists of all time.

It came to me as a surprise that Rembrandt was in some way connected to my own Baptist heritage even if it was rather farfetched being via the Anabaptists four hundred years ago. It seems the following questions require answers:

**WAS REMBRANDT ASSOCIATED WITH THE WATERLANDER MENNONITES ? and  
IF SO, WHAT WAS THE NATURE OF THE ASSOCIATION ?**

Baptists are not generally noted for their interest in, or contribution to, the visual arts. It was exciting to think Rembrandt is part of our tradition. I discussed the possibility with others who knew nothing of an association between Rembrandt and the Mennonites and were doubtful if such a thing ever existed. As a result, I have undertaken some research into whether Rembrandt was associated with the Dutch Waterlander Mennonites and if so, what was the nature of this association. I would now like to trace the history of this matter.

### **Mid Nineteenth Century : The Association is Suspected but Unproven**

It appears to me that the secular art historians have not until recent years paid much attention to this matter if at all. However, Mennonite scholars have been working on the subject since the late 1940's. In fact prints made from Rembrandt's painting that portrays the wealthy Mennonite cloth merchant, ship owner and preacher Cornelius Anslø ,and his wife, began appearing in North American homes and church vestibules in the 1950's celebrating an unproven association between the great master and the Dutch Mennonites.



**Figure 2**

At the time, Mennonite Scholars quoted a passage from the Italian Art critic Filippo Baldinucci who wrote in 1686 concerning Rembrandt:

“ The artist professed in those days the religion of the Menists, which though false too, is yet opposed to that of Calvin, inasmuch as they do not practice the rite of baptism before the age of thirty. They do not elect educated preachers, but employ for such posts men of humble condition as long as they are esteemed by them honourable and just people, and for the rest they live following their caprice.”

Baldinucci's source of information was the Danish painter Bernhard Keihl (1624-1687), who worked in Rembrandt's workshop between 1642 and 1644.

Poet Julia Kasdorf, Assistant Professor in Writing at Messiah College PA wrote an article in 1996 titled "The Master and the Mennonite" published in Newsletter of the Historical Committee & Archives of the Mennonite Church. In that article she wrote the following:

“This was a critical period in the great artist’s career, following the death of his wife, when he painted his masterpiece, *The Night Watch*. It also coincides with his association with Anso (that portrait was commissioned in 1641) and the Mennonite art students and patrons. From those years on, Rembrandt gradually sank into financial ruin, while turning increasingly to biblical subjects that would earn him little income. It is especially in these later paintings that some have recognised a quality suggestive of contact with Mennonite spirituality. However, it is primarily through the preacher Anso that Mennonites have staked their association with Rembrandt.”

In 1947, Ira Landis published an article in the “Mennonite Historical Bulletin” suggesting incorrectly Rembrandt’s parents were Mennonites. In 1952, Cornelius Krahn reported in “Mennonite Life” the findings of two art historians, Jakob Rosenberg and H.M. Rothermend, who were working independently on Rembrandt’s relations with the Waterlander Mennonites. Rothermend in his article “Rembrandt and the Mennonites” in the same issue claims Rembrandt had contact with Mennonites in his youth and was certainly affiliated with them after 1641. Both scholars claim the Mennonites affected Rembrandt’s religious paintings especially the Anabaptist ordinances of the Lord’s supper, adult baptism and foot washing.



In 1956, a special edition of "Mennonite Life" was published to celebrate the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Rembrandt's birth. The cover featured the Anslo portrait. The edition also included three articles on Rembrandt which were clearly intended to establish the connection between the master artist and the Dutch Mennonites. One of the articles by Irvin Horst was titled "Rembrandt knew Mennonites". In this he traced Rembrandt's connections from boarding with a Mennonite family to associations with Mennonite art students, poets and patrons. Horst identifies thirteen Mennonites portrayed by Rembrandt together with a catalogue of possible Mennonite subjects.

### **Late Nineteenth Century : The Association is Proven**

After the 1950's new research showed Rembrandt not only knew Mennonites but that he had close association with the Amsterdam Waterlander Mennonite Community. This was as a result of his relationship with Hendrick Uylenburgh who was a prominent member of that Community, and a most important art dealer who ran an artists' studio in which Rembrandt worked from 1631 to 1635, responsible for art production. Rembrandt lived in the Uylenburgh house where he met his future wife Saskia who was Uylenburgh's niece. After their marriage in 1633, they continued to live in the Uylenburgh house for a period of one year. Clearly



**Figure 4**

Uylenburgh provided Rembrandt with access to the Waterlander Mennonite circle which resulted in profitable portrait commissions. In 1631 and 1640 Rembrandt invested considerable sums of money into Uylenburgh's enterprise.

Rembrandt purchased his own house in 1639 which was next door to Uylenburgh's. In his grand new residence he established a studio similar to that he had been part of with Uylenburgh. This residence is now the Rembrandt House Museum which has been set up to replicate what it was like in Rembrandt's time with the assistance of most detailed records made at that time.



**Figure 5**

In 1964 Jakob Roseburg, Professor of Fine Arts at Harvard wrote in his book "Rembrandt Life and Work" the following:

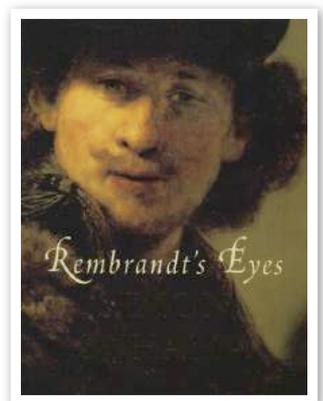
"Comparatively little emphasis has been given, in the literature on Rembrandt, to the artist's relationship to the Mennonites. Some theologians have dismissed this



**Figure 6**

problem, but too exclusively from the theological angle."...."A study of the Mennonite literature, and Menno's own writings in particular, will reveal how close Rembrandt came in his Biblical representations to the spiritual attitude of this sect."

Christopher White in his 1984 book "Rembrandt" writes about the Master Painter: "In his own unorthodox way he was a deeply religious man but it is doubtful whether he followed any one religion. His attitude can be most closely matched by that of the Mennonites, whose creed is based on the original and literal contents of the Bible and excludes all dogmas based on subsequent events."



**Figure 7**

Simon Schama, Professor in Art History and History at Columbia University in New York has written extensively about the Dutch Golden Age in his 1991 book “The Embarrassment of Riches” and his 1999 book “Rembrandt’s Eyes”. Both books explore a time of innovation in science, economics and the arts. Schama writes about the history of the Mennonites and their flight from Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands for sanctuary in Poland. Schama writes in great detail about Hendrick van Uylenburgh who moved from Danzig to the Netherlands around 1625 with a large number of fellow Mennonites when a change in the Stadholder resulted in an era of toleration. Schama surmises Rembrandt first meet Uylenburgh when he was studying with artist Pieter Lastman close to the Uylenburgh house. Uylenburgh travelled to Leiden 3 years later to purchase art from Rembrandt. Uylenburgh established himself as a prominent and versatile entrepreneur in the Amsterdam art market. His business was cash hungry and Rembrandt lent him one thousand guilders, a considerable sum at the time. In return, Rembrandt gained access to Uylenburgh’s wide circle of contacts including the Waterlander Mennonite Community together with workshop experience required by the artists guild before Rembrandt could set up as an independent master.



**Figure 8**

Schama's books record in a rather off hand manner the connections between Rembrandt and the Mennonites. In "The Embarrassment of Riches" Schama writes "Rembrandt came from a family in which the father was a Calvinist and the mother a practising Catholic.

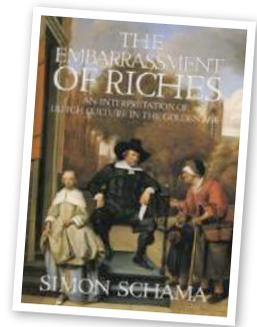


Figure 9

At different times he himself was attracted to Remonstrants, Mennonites and to the highly unorthodox sects like the Collegiants and the Waterlanders whose emphasis on extreme scriptural simplicity appealed to a Christian for whom the Bible was an anthology of human drama”

Unfortunately Schama shows little interest in the association between Rembrandt and the Mennonites and spends one third of “Rembrandt’s Eyes” writing about the great Catholic artist, Peter Paul Rubens who he argues Rembrandt saw as a rival and attempted to outdo

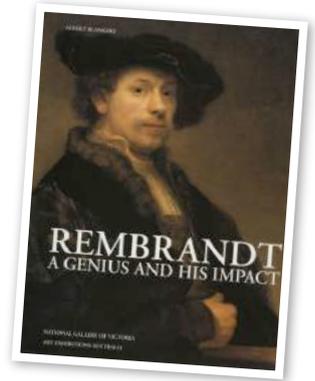
#### **Twenty First Century :**

#### **Serious Research into the Association and Quadri-Centennial Birthday Celebrations**

It seems to me that by the turn of the century, some art historians had accepted that Rembrandt had extensive contact with the Mennonites and were turning their attention to serious study of Mennonite influence on his prodigious work. Other art historians remained silent on this subject.

The National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne mounted an exhibition in 1997 and published a lavish book titled “Rembrandt a Genius and His Impact “ with a number of chapters by Art Historians on various aspects of Rembrandt’s life and work.

**Figure 10**



It is disappointing and even amazing that although reference is made in “Rembrandt - A Genius and His Impact” to Rembrandt’s association with Uylenburgh, no comment is made concerning the influence of Mennonites on Rembrandt’s life and work.

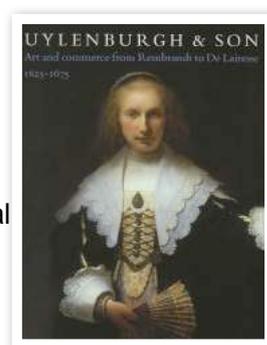
It seems some scholars do not regard the association as important with respect to Rembrandt’s work. This I find hard to understand.

The matter of whether Rembrandt had an association with the Mennonites, or whether the Mennonites had an influence upon him, is of great interest in the Mennonite World but apparently not taken very seriously in some parts of the secular fine arts establishment. In fact the December 2006 edition of the “Smithsonian” magazine featured an article celebrating “Rembrandt: The Master at 400” which acknowledges the association and with Uylenburgh, but not that Uylenburgh was a Mennonite, or that the association was of any significance.

If there was any doubt about the association it was totally erased by the publication of “Uylenburgh and Son Art and Commerce from Rembrandt to De Lairessee 1625-1675”. This impressive book was published in 2006 by the Rembrandt Huis Museum, in Amsterdam.

With the publication of this book the Mennonite/Rembrandt association was confirmed beyond dispute by the in-depth research for this book undertaken by historians from the Rembrandt Huis Museum, Jaap van der Veen and Friso Lammerstse. The foreword to the book includes the following statement which sets the matter in context and is supported by detailed investigations of original documents:

**Figure 11**



“Launched by Uylenburgh Rembrandt rapidly become the most eminent and best paid portrait painter in Holland... The wealthy Amsterdam merchants who had their portraits painted by Rembrandt generally moved in the same Mennonite circles as Hendrick Uylenburgh.”

This publication covers in great detail the activities of Hendrick Uylenburgh from agent for the King of Poland to art dealer in Amsterdam. The authors document the Mennonite movement in 17<sup>th</sup> Century Danzig and Amsterdam together with its strong involvement with art and the business of art.

Rembrandt's association with the preacher Anso is now no longer the prime evidence of his links with the Mennonites. By the twenty first century, serious studies were being published which look not only at Rembrandt, but also the nature of the Waterlander Mennonites and their emerging involvement in secular society.

### **Who Were the Waterlander Mennonites ?**

The University of Amsterdam's 1994 publication titled "From Martyr to Muppy" deals with the Dutch Anabaptists as hunted heretics who finally became accepted Mennonite urban professionals or "muppies". It explores Mennonite contributions to the rich history of Dutch culture including the connection between economic advancement among the Dutch Mennonites in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and their extraordinary interest in art and literature.



**Figure 12**

In 1996 Mennonite scholars Piet Visser Professor of Book History and Curator of the Mennonite library, University Library of Amsterdam and Mary Sprunger Professor of History at Eastern Mennonite University in Virginia wrote in their book "Menno Simons : Places, Portraits and Progeny" about the gradual emancipation of the Mennonites in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in Netherlands "They came out from the dark wings and played not only economic, but also technological, intellectual and artistic roles on the World's Centre Stage".

The Mennonites movement comprised of a number of distinct groups with different views on points of doctrine and ethics. The two largest groups in Amsterdam were the Waterlanders and the Flemish Mennonites. The Waterlanders, were the more liberal of the two, they held worship services in a building named 'de Toren' or "by the Tower" and the Flemish worshipped in a building named 'het lam' or "by the Lamb".

**Figure 13**



The Rembrandt House Museum Scholars Lammertse and van der Veen write that "in the early seventeenth century the various Mennonite factions in Amsterdam formed approximately seven percent of the population.... Few though they were this religious minority comprised many affluent merchants and artisans and exercised a disproportionately strong influence on the city's economic life. Many Mennonite merchants traded in the Baltic, if only because ships sailing to that region did not need to carry arms. Interestingly enough, their religious leaders wrote little about economic matters, but evidently had no objection to their followers earning money." "In business, Mennonites tended to form partnerships and deal with members of their own community, and in this respect Hendrick Uylenburgh was no exception."

Mary Sprunger Professor of History Eastern Mennonite University in her chapter in "From Martyr to Muppy" notes "The membership lists of "by the Tower", extant from 1612 to 1668 provide the comprehensive clues to the social composition of the congregation. Over the course of 56 years, 3137 persons joined either by baptism or by letter of transfer.

At any one time, there may have been about 1,000 members”... “unfortunately it is not possible to say to what extent the Waterlanders mirrored Amsterdam society in general, because no figures for the city as a whole exist. Mennonites in Amsterdam were shut out of the most elite group in the city, the patrician or regency class, because of their non-participation in government. Nor were Mennonites present in the lowest social group, defined by contemporaries as the rabble... which included vagrants, beggars and social undesirables. The majority of Waterlanders came from the middling class of small businessmen, skilled artisans and unskilled workers... but also had many representatives among the prosperous class of non-ruling notables, rich merchants, businessmen, shop owners and intellectuals.”

In “From Martyr to Muppy” Sjouke Voolstra Professor of Anabaptist/Mennonite Theology and History at the Mennonite Seminary, Amsterdam argues “The slow integration of the Mennonite into Dutch society in the seventeenth century had historical, sociological, economic and religious reasons. In spite of the fact that the Mennonites in this ‘Golden Age’ remained a minority with limited religious freedom, nowhere else in Europe were Mennonites able to live in such relative tolerance as in the Republic of the Seven United Provinces. The Calvinist offensive against the Anabaptist competitor died down around the middle of the seventeenth century. The merchant had triumphed over the preacher. By this time the Mennonites had already **became indispensable honey bees for the state made important contributions to both the economy and to culture.**”

In her summary, Mary Sprunger writes:

“The close social and family ties formed within a dissenting Church helped the Waterlanders elite to amass comfortable, not to say large, fortunes. Nevertheless, perhaps because of their rejection of weapons and political participation, the Mennonites were not highly represented on the uppermost rung of Amsterdam’s social and economic ladder during the seventeenth century. This would change, however by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as some Mennonite families continue to accumulate capital.”

The largest concentration of prosperous Mennonites was in the textile industry and many of the Waterlander deacons were cloth merchants. Mennonite Engineers made significant contributions to ship design and the draining of the swamps. Many were engaged in agriculture and became recognised leaders in land reclamation.

**Figure 14**



Cornelius Dyck in his 1993 book “An Introduction to Mennonite History” writes:

“The Union of Utrecht in 1579 provided that each person should be allowed to remain free in his religion. These actions did not mean that all oppression had stopped but the Mennonites were no longer forced to go to prison or to the stake for their faith... Full freedom of worship, however, did not exist for them until the nineteenth century.

Mennonites nevertheless soon made a place in the life of the nation” .....

.....Trade with Greenland, whale and herring fishing were almost completely in Mennonite hands. They were very involved within the Baltic Sea trade, ship building, the lumber business, the food industry and were the backbone of the textile industry....

For the most part Mennonites were highly literate, partly from a desire to read the Bible and the martyrologies, but also by way of overcoming social disadvantage. In the seventeenth century a high percentage of the medical doctors in the Netherlands were Mennonites, this being one of the professions open to them. Since doctors were the best educated members of the congregations, they often served as pastors at the same time.”

Cornelius Dyck also provides some historical perspective as follows:

“All this progress in material and cultural ways was not pure gain. A century or more after the Mennonites suffered deeply for their faith, they were tolerated and many were wealthy. Many no longer believed deeply in the things for which their fathers and mothers had died. Ease and luxury had done what persecution could not do.”....”In mid-seventeenth century the Dutch Mennonites had no serious threat to their life from without, leaders arose who tried to reverse the process of cooling off from within. They collected the stories of the martyrs, the writings of the heroes of faith, and wrote the history of their heritage, in order to renew succeeding generations.”

Clearly they did succeed in making succeeding generations aware of where they had come from. Modern day Mennonites have an excellent knowledge of their history and a fine appreciation of their heritage.



**Figure 15**

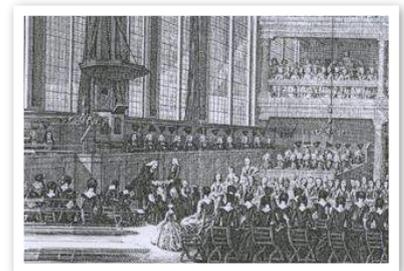
The Amsterdam Waterlanders' place of worship located at Singel 158 in a former warehouse was called "by the Tower" due to the proximity of a Tower. It was rectangular in plan with men sitting on hard wooden pews lining three walls with women sitting in rows of chairs in the middle. All seats faced the elevated pulpit in the centre of the remaining wall which had huge windows providing daylight for reading the scriptures. The focus was upon the exposition of the word visually reinforced by the prominent pulpit as shown in this copy of an engraving dated 1691.

**Figure 16**



The conservative Flemish Mennonites (Lamist) place of worship was called "by the Lamb" due to the close proximity of a Brewery that used a lamb as its trademark. The building at Singel 452 is the present Church 'bij het Lam' (also known as the Singelkerk) which is located off the street down a passage. This engraving published in 1743 shows the interior of the "Lamist" Mennonite Church during a baptismal service.

**Figure 17**



As the result of theological disputes called "War of the Lambs" there was a regrouping in (1664-1668) of the Dutch Mennonites into two new branches, the Lamists and the Zonists. As part of this, the Waterlanders in Amsterdam merged with the Lamists and worshipped with them at Singel 452.

The Zonists derived their name from the warehouse building they purchased at Singel 118.

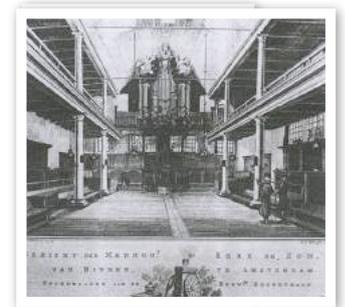
The engraving published in 1691 shows the interior of the building the Zonist Mennonite Church in Amsterdam. The Church received its name from the image of a sun already on the gable of the building when it was acquired following a division from the more liberal Lamist Church. The building is still standing but no longer used for worship.



**Figure 18**

The image of a sun is still visible on the front facade of the building.

This copy of an engraving depicts the “de Zon” place of worship as it was in 1790 more than a century after Rembrandt’s time showing a large pipe organ a symbol of the financial strength of the congregation and acceptance of music in worship.



**Figure 19**

A reconciliation of the various Mennonite groups took place in 1801 when the various factions joined to form the United Mennonite Church. A gable stone on the Singelkerk shows the sun, the lamb and the tower, together with a Latin phrase “Bound in Love and Peace”. (FOOTNOTE 1)

In an article published in the Mennonite Quarterly Review of April 1999, Keith Sprunger, Professor of History, Bethel College, Kansas writes “The Mennonite churches in the Netherlands began as simple secretive house churches. Hidden worship was required because of persecution, but after Dutch independence from Spain in the late sixteenth century, the Dutch republic tolerated but did not officially encourage Mennonites. Their meeting places had to be located off the street and “behind the houses” without any tower or bells or public show such a place was called a hidden church”.

Keith Sprunger also observed that the Dutch Mennonites were not so interested in the previous use of a building but more interested in the moral responsibility of having a good building no matter what it was used for in the past. This contrasted with the attitude of the Puritans who had crossed over from England. They were most concerned about the “purity” of the building and the influence of the “old idolatrous shapes”.

Architectural historians have characterised Mennonite architecture along with that of other Christian dissenters, including Baptists, as “unadorned simplicity” contrasting with liturgical based traditions which prefer “elegant presence”.

In fact Reinbuild Janzen Assistant Professor of Art History Washburn University, Kansas writing in the same issue of the “Mennonite Quarterly Review” said “the Anabaptist Mennonite attitude towards the visual arts in worship settings has historically been iconoclastic”

However in other areas of their life, especially their homes, the Mennonites celebrated the visual arts.

### **The Waterlanders and The Visual Arts**

Stephanie Dickey Assistant Professor of Art History,  
Herron School of Art, Indiana – Purdue University



Indianapolis, declares in an article in “The Christian Century”

**Figure 20**

published June 2000: “Patronage of the arts converted by Protestants from a privilege of the Church to thriving private enterprise, becomes a means of displaying personal success and civic virtue. Rembrandt participated in this consumer paradise as artist, art dealer and collector of exotic artefacts.”

Dickey also observed that the Waterlanders lived in an environment in which “artistic activities were regarded as worthy venues for the expression of faith and morality”.

Piet Visser and Mary Sprunger wrote in “Menno Simmons: Places, Portraits and Progeny”

“In the Netherlands, the moderate Waterlanders formed a vanguard among the Mennonites for decades. They adapted the quickest to the surrounding society, or were first to pay the price with their outward identity – judgement of their experience depends entirely on one’s perspective.

The fact is that Waterlander preachers were immortalised in portraits more often than those from other groups... The general public associates the Dutch Golden Age primarily with an artistic output of unequalled quantity and quality. While elsewhere in Europe nobles and clergy promoted the arts and literature, in the Protestant Low Countries bourgeois patronage by the regent and merchant classes reigned supreme.... Out of an ethically driven, almost artisanal mentality, emerged writers and poets, painters and engravers, bright minds and technical geniuses... Some placed their talents exclusively in the service of their own Mennonite circle. Most, however, worked for any potential client who was willing to furnish a commission, without regard to religious conviction..."



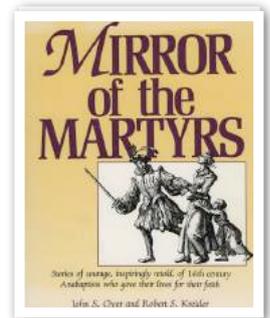
**Figure 21**

"...In the century of Rembrandt, the grand master painter, a number of Mennonites artists availed themselves of the tremendous demand for paintings. In keeping with their religious – ethical principles, thoroughness stood at the forefront of Mennonite painters, and they applied themselves conscientiously to whatever their patrons, whoever they might be, desired. In Dutch Anabaptism there is no evidence of restriction regarding the second commandment, that against making images."



**Figure 22**

“Rembrandt was the most prominent artist whose work was purchased by notable Mennonite art collectors and who painted numerous portraits of Mennonites in Hendrick Uylenburgh’s Waterlander circle. In addition there were many other significant Dutch Mennonite, painters, engravers and calligraphers such as Lambert Jacobsz, Govert Flink, Salomon and Jacob Van Rysdael, Frans Hals, Carel Van Mander (also a poet) and in the next generation Jan Luyken. The latter enjoys an ongoing appreciation within the Mennonite world and a most important place in Mennonite history. Luyken, one time member of the Amsterdam Lamist Church was the illustrator of the famous book “Mirror of the Martyrs”, written by Van Braght, first published in 1660. No book except for the Bible has been more influential in the perpetuating and nurturing the faith of the Mennonites than the “Mirror of the Martyrs”.



**Figure 23**

Jan Luyken’s engravings are in the characteristic style developed by Rembrandt and his studio.

The “Mirror of the Martyrs” continues to be reprinted and is the prime resource in reminding Mennonites of their heritage of persecution and flight to new lands offering tolerance.



**Figure 24**

The historical setting of the Dutch “Golden Age” encouraged artistic endeavours. Painters playwrights and poets were given social status in view of the perceived moral impact of their activities.

Piet Visser in “From Martyr to Muppy” writes:

“Both the painter and the poet were generally considered as contributors to the moral standards of society. Seventeenth-century paintings, poems and plays were supposed to contain a Christian message, to serve the purpose of a moral, general edification besides providing other lessons, such as the domestic scene depicting a kitchen maid sitting by the open fire was usually not just a reproduction of cosy reality, but also contained some generally recognised truths about vices and virtues, good and evil. In that time merchants, bankers, ship owners and civil governors were in charge. In contrast to the Middle Ages when the Catholic Church patronised artistic skills, it was now primarily the new political and economic elite which created a demand for artistic products, for paintings and poetry, they dominated and promoted the moral values and world views of which the products reflect....”



**Figure 25**

“...When we consider the Mennonite idea that the Christian way of life should be expressed in deeds and not just in mere words, we can understand that not only the Mennonite merchant as the Mennonite craftsman, but also the Mennonite artist, was supposed to be guided and inspired by Biblical truths and ethics.”



**Figure 26**

Mennonites have long recognised a perennial problem for their artists and intellectuals being the relationship of the individual to the community. Even today they continue to address the tension of being “in the world but not of the world” which characterises the Mennonites relationship with the dominant culture.

Modern day Mennonites continue to struggle with the use of visual arts in their worship. They tend towards simplicity but also see that the visual arts can play a role as long as they are not confused with “decoration”, do not become icons, and understand a work of art as the “door to the spiritual.”

### **Was Rembrandt A Waterlander Mennonite?**

Was Rembrandt a Mennonite or Mennist  
as Baldinucci wrote?



**Figure 27**

Consider these facts: following the death of his wife, Saskia, Rembrandt's sons' nurse, Geertge Dirx became his mistress only to be latter acrimoniously supplanted in 1649 by the younger Hendrickje Stoffels. Rembrandt did not marry Stoffels as to do so would have meant renouncing his life interest in the inheritance left to him by his wife. Stoffels was subsequently summoned to appear before a ecclesiastical court of the Calvinist Church. In 1654 Stoffels was exhorted a number of times by the court to renounce her illicit relationship with Rembrandt and do penance. Ignoring these exhortations, she continued to live with Rembrandt and in October 1654 gave birth to a daughter of Rembrandt named Cornelia. In that period Rembrandt's clientele diminished, he failed to meet his debts and is declared bankrupt in 1656, losing his grand residence and possessions, he even sold the space above his wife's grave.



**Figure 28**

Stephanie Dickey writes “Ultimately, this was as much a moral disaster as a financial one, since Rembrandt’s Calvinist patrons regarded material wealth as a sign of God’s favour, good stewardship of one’s assets on an ethical necessity, and bankruptcy as a sin”



Rembrandt lived in close proximity to the Waterlanders’ Place of Worship, places of business and residences.

(FOOTNOTE 2)

**Figure 29**

Notwithstanding Rembrandt’s close personal and business associations with Mennonites and in view of his personal behaviour, it appears to me most unlikely that he would have been accepted as a member by the Waterlander Mennonites who were very serious about membership matters as shown by the “English Affair”. However, because Rembrandt was not a member of the Waterlander Church, this doesn’t mean he was not influenced by the Mennonites or they by him. There appears to be ample evidence of both.

As discussed previously Mennonite scholars have been investigating the nature of Rembrandt’s association with the Waterlanders since the ‘1940s’ and accepted long ago a close association existed.

Jan Gleysteen in his 1984 “Mennonite Guide to West Europe” wrote : “Although there is no documentation to suggest that Rembrandt was a Mennonite, he was close to and influenced by, the Waterlander Mennonites”.

## **Did The Waterlanders Influence Rembrandt the Artist and did Rembrandt the Artist Influence the Waterlanders?**

Jacob Rosenberg observed:

“Whether Rembrandt really became a member of the Mennonite Community or was only closely attached to it does not greatly matter for the understanding of his work...

But what really counts is Rembrandt's spiritual affinity to this sect, with which he shared many basic beliefs, far more than Calvinism....

**Figure 30**



Rembrandt shared with the Mennonites an indifference to all dogmatic notions and institutions, seeking, as they did, to go back to the simple truth of the Bible.”

(FOOTNOTE 3)

“... All in all, one gains the impression that the truly evangelical simplicity of the Mennonites, their sobriety, sincerity and humility are reflected in Rembrandt's religious art”.

**Figure 31**



An enormous number of books and articles that have been written about Rembrandt and his work.

A simplistic overview of Rembrandt's work shows he developed two specialities: firstly, portraits that made their sitters look both distinguished and vividly alive, and secondly, dramatic history paintings that explored the great and familiar Biblical themes.

Many Art historians note Rembrandt's work reflects a sound knowledge of the Bible and his ability to make Biblical stories both entertaining and profound.



**Figure 32**

Stephanie Dickey writes:

“... Rembrandt was not, as far as we know, an active churchgoer himself. His spirituality reveals itself best in his art, arguably the greatest body of work ever produced by a Protestant painter.”

Andrew Marshall in his 1987 book “The History and Techniques of the Great Masters - Rembrandt” writes of Rembrandt’s painting “The Adoration of the Shepherds”. This is one of several small scale Biblical works of the 1640’s in which the figures are treated in the tradition of contemporary Dutch genre painting. It may possible reflect the beliefs of the Mennonites, a Protestant sect which, placed great importance on the Biblical injunction to “Love they neighbour” and with which Rembrandt is known to have been closely associated. This could have had some bearing on the way Rembrandt expressed divine events in everyday, down to earth terms, easily accessible to his contemporaries, with an emphasis on individual humility and quiet devotion”.

At this point I wish to return to Rembrandt’s most well known commissions received from a Waterlander Mennonite. In 1641 Cornelius Anslo commissioned Rembrandt to paint a double portrait of Anslo and his wife to hang in Anslo’s new house scheduled for completion in the following year.



**Figure 33**

In addition Anslo requested a single portrait etching of himself seated at his desk which Schama assumed was for distribution among his flock. Anslo and his wife had become prosperous by this time and Schama notes that in the portrait “The for trim on the coats of both him and wife manages to advertise this substance without violating too blatantly the Mennonite aversion to conspicuous display... None of his contemporaries come close to Rembrandt’s instinctive ability to inject drama in simplicity and still manage not to compromise the integrity of the subject.”

In both the Anslo painting and etching, Rembrandt addresses the claims of the eye and the ear in art works commissioned to promote the exposition of the word over visual imagery.

This was further highlighted at the time by poet Joost Vanden Vondel himself a one time a Deacon of the Waterlander congregation. Vondel who ranks among the Dutch as Shakespeare does among the English composed the following four lines:

“O Rembrandt, paint Cornelius’s voice  
The visible part is the least of him:  
The invisible can only be known through the ears.  
Who Anslo wants to know must hear him”



**Figure 34**

Rembrandt did just that he painted “the word”, he made the invisible visible.

The preacher Anslo had legendary oratorical skills expounding the word of God. To indicate the source of Anslo message, Rembrandt places Anslo with an open Bible in front of him. Anslo's wife looks at the texts as she listens to her husband. Rembrandt brilliantly, and paradoxically, has created a picture that proclaims the Mennonite belief in the centrality of the word.

In the etching of Anslo, the preacher is alone in his study. His pen and inkwell suggest he has been interrupted while writing a sermon. Behind him a painting leans facing the wall and a nail in the wall above it hints that the painting has been taken down. In doing this Rembrandt responds to Vondel whose poem was found to be inscribed on the back of a preparatory drawing made for this etching. The artist presents in his Anslo portraits the Mennonite notion that verbal perception is more truthful than sight.



**Figure 35**

Simon Schama writes that Rembrandt by creating a temple from a stack of books and a candle demonstrated “astounding capacity for transforming the ordinary into the sublime” ..... “The extremely low angle of vision, the corner of the table thrust out at an angle to the picture plane... all combined to give the impression of something like a high altar, atop which rest the sacred books. And those books, which catch the full illumination coming from the left, are not mere heaps of parchment and paper. The pages stir, rise and flutter with light and life. The books, like Ezekiel’s dry bones, respire. The word lives.”

Simon Schama claims that in the Anso painting Rembrandt “had created what preachers had said was impossible : “Protestant icons”. He points out that the smoking candle in paintings often alluded to the brevity of earthly life and that “the juxtaposition of book and candle to suggest things immortal and worldly, the spirit and the flesh.” He sees the double portrait as:

“more than a bundle of symbols, more than a painter trumping a poet..  
a work that is both vision and diction.”

Stephanie Dickey in her critique of Schama’s book “This poetic description incorporates an essential principle of both Mennonite and mainstream Protestant thought: the supremacy of word over image, a prejudice that Dutch painters in general and Rembrandt in particular countered by imbuing their portraits and historical subjects with the visual equivalent of sound. Anso’s parted lips and empathetic gesture almost make it possible, as the Dutch poet Vondel wrote, for the viewer to hear the preacher’s voice.”

Rembrandt paints “the visual equivalent of sound” this is artistic genius with absolute understanding of the subject matter. The Anso portraits have been elevated as far as Mennonite are concerned to the equivalent of iconography.

Did The Waterlander Mennonites Influence Rembrandt the Artist?

I suggest that they clearly did so. That is not to say the Mennonites were the only influence upon Rembrandt but they were a most significant one. This was so notwithstanding Rembrandt had a lot of contact with other groups in cosmopolitan Amsterdam including the Jewish community, which lived in the immediate neighbourhood and whose main synagogue was just down the street.

### **In Conclusion**

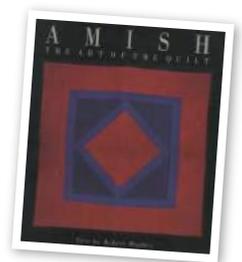
**Figure 36**

It appears that a close association existed for some time between Rembrandt and the Amsterdam Waterlander Mennonites which was important to both. The nature and outworking of this association is fascinating and still to be further explored as new research brings forth more information.



**Figure 37**

For me the fact that the Waterlanders embraced Rembrandt, and other artists, illustrates how the Mennonites clearly accepted the visual arts unlike other dissenting faith traditions that rejected the visual arts. Non-conformist denominations, including us Baptists, have placed greater priority upon oral communication rather than visual communication. For good reason the excesses of pre-reformation times were eliminated, however this has led us to a very sparse visual tradition.



We can learn from our Anabaptist cousins who also adopted oral communication but when given security, tolerance and opportunity these people exhibited great creativity in the visual arts. The Amish quilts in North America and the Hutterite ceramics in Moravia along with “Golden Age” Dutch Mennonite painting and engraving are wonderful examples of faith communities that valued both the oral and visual.



**Figure 38**

Rembrandt remains influential to twenty first century Christians. Reproduction prints of Rembrandt’s “The Return of the Prodigal Son” are most popular today. This was Rembrandt’s last work left on the easel at his death and completed by a pupil. Schama writes concerning this painting “We can scarcely make out his features, so lightly has the artist drawn them, but we see enough to know this prodigal is for Everyman, for the child who has taken all the sins of the world on his shoulders” This painting which inspired the meditations of Henri Nouwn, and others, has attained modern day iconic status in mainstream Protestant denominations including in Baptist circles.

**Figure 39**



**Figure 40**



Rembrandt was self-conscious producing many self portraits during his lifetime, hiding nothing, honestly recording the ravages of time.

Some observers have suggested that in the good times he painted himself living it up in a “far” country and in the bad times, at the end of his life, he painted himself as the Prodigal son seeking forgiveness.

**Figure 41**



In Schama's words:

“So the son kneels against the loins of the father, eyes shut, arms across his chest, they melt together in a simple form, the pathetic shred of humanity returned to the boundlessly encompassing compassion of his creator”.

**Figure 42**



There were no lengthy tolling of bells, chants, poems or prayers when Rembrandt was buried in a rented space under the floor of the Westkerk, on the eighth of October 1669.

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## FOOTNOTES

### NOTE 1

Seventeenth Century Mennonite Places of Worship were located on the west side of the Singel Canal as follows:

- The Waterlander Mennonite Place of Worship was at “by the Tower”, Singel 158. This building no longer exists.
- The Flemish (Lamist) Mennonite Place of Worship was at “by the Lamb”, Singel 452.
- Following the “War of the Lambs” the liberal Waterlanders merged with the Lamists and worshipped together at Singel 452, known today as the “Singelkerk”.
- Following the “War of the Lambs” the conservative Mennonites in Amsterdam purchased a warehouse at Singel 118 called “the Sun”. This building exists and is now business offices and apartments.
- Reconciliation of various Mennonite groups in 1801 resulted in the United Mennonite Church which still worships at the Singelkerk.

### NOTE 2

Rembrandt had an association with the Waterlander Mennonites who in turn had an association with the English Baptists. Could Rembrandt have come into contact with the English when he lived in Amsterdam?

Rhonda Edmonds 8 October  
2009 10:57 PM

The English Separatists (lead by Smyth and Helwys) gathered together for worship as the first Baptist Church in the world in 1609 at the East India Bakehouse in Bakkerstraat. The Bakehouse was owned by Jan Munter a wealthy ship owner and Mennonite. The English Baptists lived and worked as a faith community in the Bakehouse which faced the Amstel River (Binnen Amstel). Helwys and approximately 10 of the group returned to England in late 1612. Smyth and 31 of the group remained and applied for membership of the Waterlander Mennonites. After long consultations amongst the Waterlander Mennonites they were accepted in 1612 and held services in the Bakehouse until 1639.

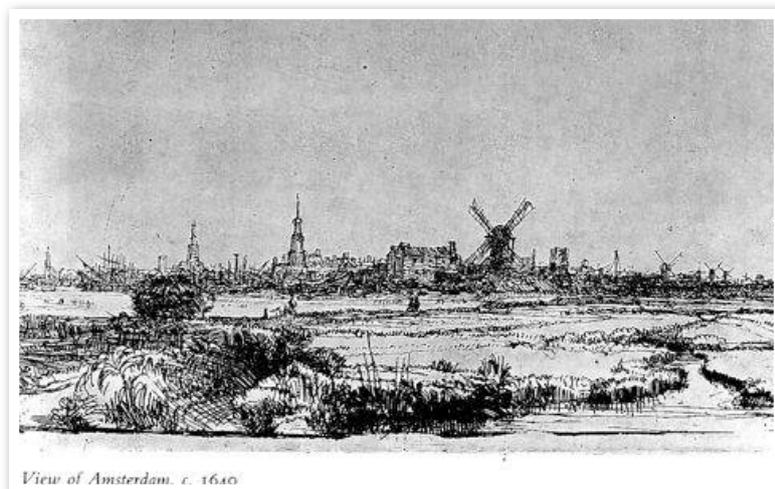


Figure 43

## NOTE 2 Con't

Rembrandt moved to Amsterdam in 1631 living in a various addresses prior to the purchase of his grand residence on the Jodenbreestraat.

Rembrandt and Saskia were married in 1633 and lived with the Uylenburghs for 2 years after which they lived from 1635 to 1637 on the Dodenstraat (next door to the pensionary Boreel), Nieuw Dodenstraat, which rang alongside the Amstel away from the Munt Tower. In 1635 Rembrandt established his studio in a warehouse on the Bloengracht (the flower market) which was close to his residence.

Pascal Bonafoux in his book "Rembrandt Substance and Shadow" reproduced a map of Amsterdam (Page 74 - 75) on which he indicated the location of Rembrandt's residence in the Dodenstraat in the immediate vicinity of the "Lamist" Mennonite place of worship, (now the Singelkerk) and within a few minutes walking distance of the East India Bakehouse.

For the period 1637 - 1639 Rembrandt and Saskia moved to the Binnen Amstel district. Christopher White in his book "Rembrandt" records that the artist wrote in 1637: "I live on the Binnen Amstel. The house is called the sugar refinery". Bonafoux in his book "Rembrandt Substance and Shadow" records the artist writing: "I reside on Binnen Amstel The house called the Sugar Bakery". Bonafoux shows on his map the location of Rembrandt's house in close proximity to the East India Bakehouse as shown on part of Pieter Bast's map of Amsterdam (1599) reproduced on the cover of the newly published "Communities of Conviction Baptist Beginnings in Europe" by Ian Randall.

In contrast, Simon Schama writes in "Rembrandt's Eyes":

"For a while at least, from 1637 to 1639, Rembrandt and Saskia were dwelling in sweetness, next door to the house called "the Sugar Bakery" on Vlooienburg Island at the east end of the city. The house faced out onto the Binnen Amstel, so they could see sails moving past their windows, the masts of moved lighters leaning in the wind, timber stacked up on the island shipyards. An unloading wharf was at their back door. Their front door led onto the busy large Houtstraat... Their neighbour was Jan van Veldesteyn, who owned and ran the "Four Sugarbread" bakery close by". (Figure 29 in this paper shows Vlooienburg Island with South to the top of the map)

Pascal Bonafoux locates Rembrandt residence on the southside of the Amstel river whereas Simon Schama locates it on the northside of the river. In fact Schama records "The site of the house, its view of the Amstel long obstructed by a row of houses built on land reclaimed from the river in 1660, is Zwanburgerstraat 41."

If Rembrandt's residence was on the southside, it was close the East India Bakehouse. If Rembrandt's residence was on the northside, the East India Bakehouse being a substantial building (3 stories with 16 tall oven chimneys) would have been clearly visible across the river.

After Rembrandt moved in 1639 to the Jodenbreestraat he would take walks outside the city into the countryside. For the next 15 years he prepared drawings and etchings of the landscape in the close vicinity of Amsterdam which Christopher White described as "not just impersonalised landscape but of a definite locality". One of his earliest works was the etching "View of Amsterdam" (1640).

## **NOTE 2 Con't**

White regards this as a view of the city from the east and others have claimed it to be from the north west. Neither of these view points appear consistent with seventeenth century maps of Amsterdam.

Jacob Rosenberg in his book "Rembrandt Life and Work" refers to Frits Lugt's "Mit Rembrandt in Amsterdam" (published in 1920) as follows:

"Lugt has corrected the assumption that this view is taken from the banks of the Y, to the northwest of the Capital. He states that Rembrandt was at this point not very far from his own home, having left the city by the St. Anthoniespoort and, after a fifteen minute walk in a south easterly direction, reached the spot from which Amsterdam appears in the etching, although with directions reversed".

If the viewing point for the etching was, as Lugt asserts, south east of the city looking towards the Binnen Amstel, then the landmarks clearly visible on the etching are correctly located. From the left to right Rembrandt has drawn the Westkerk (with clocktower) the Munt Tower (with spire), large storehouses, single windmill, the Montelbaanstoren (without spire) and a row of windmills on the eastside embankment.

Mariet Westermann in her book "Rembrandt" (2000) supports the concept: "One of his first landscape prints, a "View of Amsterdam" combines direct observation and judicious composition to create a panorama of the city. Although the buildings are placed in order Rembrandt would have seen from a dyke near his house the print is less a typographic record than a rhythmic evocation of the city's profile against a towering sky".

Rosenburg writes that the storehouses in the etching were of "the East and West India companies". The geographic location of these storehouses appears to be in the Binnen Amstel district in close proximity to the East India Bakehouse.

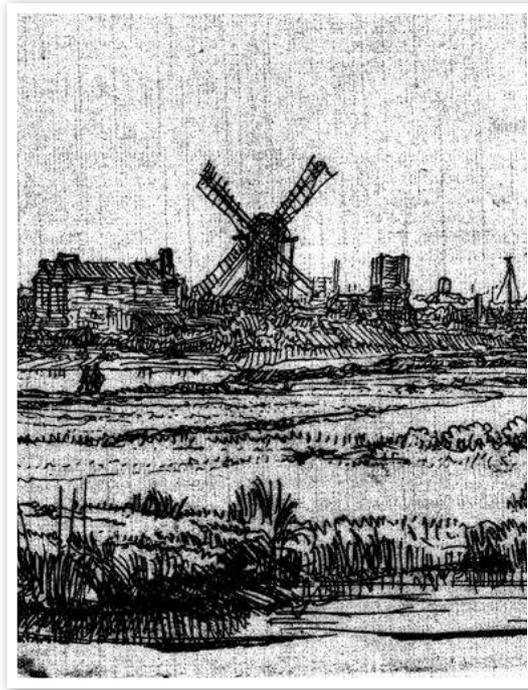
All this may be circumstantial and requires further research into primary sources.

However, these records show Rembrandt lived and worked in the same parts of Amsterdam where the "English" Baptists had also lived, worked and worshipped. It is understood the "English" merged into the Waterlander Community within a couple of generations. Prior to that period the foreign English group would have been obvious when living at the East India Bakehouse.

In summary it seems the separate identity of the "English" fades about the time Rembrandt moves from the Leiden to Amsterdam in 1631. However the presence of the English and their application to join the membership of the Waterlander Mennonites ("The English Affair") had a significant impact upon the Mennonites for many years which would have included Rembrandt's life in Amsterdam.

It seems to me most likely that Rembrandt would have known about the "English" by virtue of frequenting the same physical environs but also as both were associated with the Waterlander Mennonites to a significant degree.

Figure 44



**NOTE 3**

Piet Visser and Mary Sprunger wrote in “Menno Simons Places, Portraits and Progeny”:

“Although the Mennonites themselves would not lack for artistic talent, they did not, with one exception produce satirical prints from among their own ranks. They lectured each other – not always gently or with much tact – orally and in great quantity of polemic writings. One of the many conflicts concerned the question of the “written or unwritten word” among the Waterlanders between 1622 and 1627. This was conducted by the most prominent opponents Hans de Ries and Nittert Obbesz. The latter a preacher in Amsterdam, was accused of Socinianism, or literalism, in the jargon of the time, while De Ries and his supporters were accused of spiritualism or enthusiasm, or subordinating the importance of Scripture to the Spirit. This was graphically portrayed in an image from a pamphlet of 1627 by Nittert’s supporter Jan Theunisz. He shows De Ries kneeling on an unprinted Bible.”

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