

Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum

Spotlight Series: October 2008

By Paul Crenshaw, assistant curator for prints and drawings and senior lecturer in art history



Rembrandt van Rijn
The Three Crosses, 1660-61
Etching and drypoint (4th state)
15 1/4 x 17 13/16 "
Gift of Dr. Malvern B. Clopton, 1930

One of the most dynamic prints ever made, Rembrandt van Rijn's *The Three Crosses* (1653) displays technical innovation and engagement with the human subjectivity of Christ's death. A torrential downpour of lines envelopes dozens of figures on the hill of Golgotha, where Christ is pictured crucified amidst the two thieves. Even though it is an inherently tragic subject commonly portrayed

in Christian tradition, never before had it been staged with such sweeping emotional force. Rembrandt was inspired by the text of the Gospels (Matthew 27:45–54) proclaiming that a darkness covered the land from noon to three o'clock, when Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lemá sabachtháni?" ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"). When Jesus died, the passage continues, the earth shook, rocks split, tombs opened, and the bodies of many sleeping saints arose. To achieve these supernatural effects, Rembrandt employed the kind of bold technical ingenuity that helped define him as one of the most significant printmakers of his age. The Kemper Art Museum impression is a fine example of the fourth state of the print, which gives a dramatically different tenor and narrative focus to his subject than earlier states did.

Rembrandt turned to the Bible as a source for his etchings throughout his career, and the 1650s were a particularly innovative period for him. He depicted scenes from both the Old and New Testaments, particularly those centered on the life of Christ, transforming the written word into a compelling pictorial language. *The Three Crosses* was made entirely in drypoint, a technique in which furrows are scratched directly into a copper plate with a stylus. These gouges create rough edges, called burr, which retain an abundant amount of ink when the plate is inked and gently wiped, resulting in velvety lines when printed. In contrast to the more common printing techniques of Rembrandt's time—such as the crisp incisions made with an engraver's tool called a burin, or the free-flowing acid-etched lines—drypoint offers a vigorous forcefulness to the quality of the lines that adds an aspect of the printmaker's touch akin to the bold impasto and brushstrokes of Rembrandt's painting style. Drypoint lines are more fragile, however, not holding up long under the force of the printing press, and for that reason drypoint-only prints were rarely attempted in the early modern period. They were economically unfeasible, and never before had one been made of this size. With especially deep gashes into the copperplate, Rembrandt covered the land in a cascading shadow, smothering the scene in a tumultuous atmosphere that heightens the raw desperation of the sacrificial figure of Christ on the central cross and his followers spread across the hill of Golgotha.

The decision by Rembrandt to make this print in 1653 was not a straightforward one. He had encountered a number of financial difficulties, construction on his house had severely restricted his painting activity, and it seems that he was forced to sell the majority of his earlier etching plates to a dealer that same year.[1] Any other artist of his day in such a

predicament might have worked in a more commercially viable technique of engraving or deeply bit etching; had he done so, a large number of impressions could have been pulled and sold in markets locally and throughout Europe, as Rembrandt's fame had already spread far abroad from his home in Amsterdam. Drypoint had the advantage of directness and attractive, rich lines, but the artist must have known that the edges would wear down and the quality of the impressions would quickly degrade.

One reason he may have felt emboldened was his own success over the preceding few years. In 1649 he had completed a print that was widely hailed as his best, a large-format etching with some drypoint that represented Christ's ministry of preaching and healing the sick. This print quickly earned the nickname "The Hundred Guilder Print" because it began to fetch extraordinary triple digit prices in an era when most prints were worth far less than one guilder.[2] Not only was the subject of the Hundred Guilder Print compelling, as it combined several disparate vignettes from chapter 19 of the Gospel of Saint Matthew, but its appreciation was also due to its extraordinary range of lighting effects. Moreover, it now seems clear that the price was artificially inflated by Rembrandt's manipulation of the supply. He gave away the print on a number of occasions, as we know from inscriptions on the back of several early impressions, and he printed very few impressions altogether.[3] The highest prices were realized, evidence suggests, not to the artist's own benefit, but on secondary markets where enthusiasts craved the master's greatest, and rarest, work in this medium.

Knowing that his most curious and bold works were in such demand, Rembrandt embarked on the ambitious *The Three Crosses*. Recent research by scholar Erik Hinterding has surveyed extant impressions of all of Rembrandt's prints and their various states. He especially focused on watermarks embedded in the European papers that Rembrandt used. With respect to *The Three Crosses*, Hinterding concluded that Rembrandt was able to print about sixty impressions from the plate in the first three states before the plate started to noticeably wear down.[4] Once again, one can compare Rembrandt's decisions with standard practices of the era: other printmakers at this point would have been faced with a decision whether to go forward printing impressions that drastically decline in quality, or abandon the plate. Rembrandt, however, discovered an alternative. He had already begun, over the course of several decades, to make an unusual number of alterations to his etching plates, strengthening a line here or there and occasionally scraping away a small portion to alter or add an element. These different states became a trademark feature of Rembrandt's work, and collectors began to take note.[5]

The impression in the collection of the Kemper Art Museum represents the radical fourth state of *The Three Crosses*. When the quality of the drypoint lines began to degrade, Rembrandt made an extreme departure, strengthening and redrawing the outlines of many figures, including Christ, and scraping away others entirely and placing them in different positions with changed poses. Along with other changes, there were originally two figures directly below Christ, leading away from the scene and toward a cave-like area to the lower right. This was presumably Nicodemus and Joseph of Aramathea, moving

toward the tomb from which Christ would be resurrected. In the fourth state Rembrandt scraped one of them away entirely, but the vestiges of the figure can still be seen.

Another dramatically altered figure was the centurion, who was originally prostrate on the ground next to Christ. Rembrandt scraped him away, again without repolishing the plate, and recast him on horseback wearing a tall hat and hoisting a lance to pierce Christ's side. Similarly, the figures clustered around the swooning Virgin Mary were completely remodeled.

The most dramatic alteration to the print, however, is the effect caused by the angled lines that Rembrandt bore into the copper, which cast the right third of the print into immense darkness. In doing so he may have meant to particularly distinguish the "good" thief from the "bad" one (Luke 23:39–43). To make these lines, Rembrandt not only had to slash hard into the metal, but he was also cutting across the grain of lines already present in the earlier image. Never before had a print been so fundamentally reworked. So different were the scenes before and after the change that connoisseurs were not sure they came from the same plate until the following century. By surrounding the scene with darkness and opening an alley of light up the center of the hill, Rembrandt directed more focus to the figure of Christ himself than to the array of other narrative elements. By doing so, he reoriented the emphasis to Christ's own suffering and moment of doubt, depicting the moment as happening just at the onset of supernatural chaos.

The dating of the fourth state of *The Three Crosses* has recently been refined, in large part due to Hinterding's research. The plate was signed and dated 1653 in the third state,

but for years scholars had assumed that the fourth state was made later, circa 1660–61, after Rembrandt had time to thoroughly rethink, and re-envision, his subject. Experts believed that the similarity of the tall hat worn by the centurion in the fourth state to that worn by the central character of Claudius Civilis in Rembrandt's 1661 painting *The Oath of the Batavians* (Stockholm, Nationalmuseum) further supported this theory.

Hinterding's research, however, strongly suggests otherwise. Watermarks were introduced in the papermaking process in Europe to distinguish one producer from another, and each batch of paper had a unique design, a sort of coat of arms, embedded into each large sheet. Not every print will reveal a watermark, however: sometimes they are obscure, and other times they may not have one at all, as smaller prints may have been made with only a section of the available page. Watermark designs on Rembrandt's prints can be dated with some accuracy based on the signed and dated prints they were used to create. This can be complicated, though, because Rembrandt printed in batches as needed, using whatever papers he had at hand that he felt were appropriate. For example, his etching *Death of the Virgin* in the Museum's collection, the plate for which is signed and dated 1639, exists in early impressions on papers with several different watermarks. The Museum's impression bears a Strasbourg bend (variant D.a.) watermark, which is the same watermark found on all impressions of *The Three Crosses* on which watermarks are visible, both before and after the major change to the fourth state of the plate. This indicates that Rembrandt made the Museum's impression of *Death of the Virgin* around the same time, using the same paper that he used for the 1653 printings of *The Three Crosses*. When Rembrandt made another print of nearly identical size, *Ecce Homo*, in 1655, he did not use the same paper again, suggesting that he had run out of that paper by

then. This also provides further evidence that the changes to the fourth state of *The Three Crosses* would have had to come prior to the printing of *Ecce Homo*. Unfortunately, the Kemper Art Museum's impression of *The Three Crosses* does not have a clearly visible watermark, but judging from the quality of the impression—the drypoint lines are still fresh and printed with clarity—it must have been made at the same time as all the other impressions of *The Three Crosses*.

In the fourth state of the print, Rembrandt's alterations were not limited to the changes he made in the drypoint lines; he also inked and printed the plates in a great variety of ways. The Kemper Art Museum's impression is richly inked, giving an even more plush effect than many other impressions of the fourth state. Rembrandt had begun this practice of varied wiping many years earlier, but his encounter in the late 1640s with papers that arrived from the Far East drastically increased his experimentation.[6] Rembrandt found that leaving a thin layer of ink on otherwise polished surfaces of the plate where there were no printed lines produced especially prominent atmospheric effects. Overall, one gains the sense of Christ as a man, in his final moment, as the land is overwhelmed by the natural forces emanating from God. While such a view of Christ could be widely appreciated, it presented a particularly poignant Protestant perspective, contrasting as it did with depictions of a heroic, muscle-bound, writhing Christ found so frequently in Catholic imagery of the seventeenth century, particularly coming from Italy and from the studio of Peter Paul Rubens in Antwerp. By choosing drypoint, by dramatically changing the plate, by printing with varied inkings, and by contrasting the humanity of Christ to a

cosmic onslaught, Rembrandt re-envisioned a common subject in Christian art, imbuing it with a new sensibility of subjective emotional response.

¹ On Rembrandt's finances and descent into insolvency, which he declared in 1656, see my volume *Rembrandt's Bankruptcy: The Artist, His Patrons, and the Art World in Seventeenth-century Netherlands* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). On the conclusion that Rembrandt sold his plates in 1653, see Erik Hinterding, *Rembrandt as an Etcher*, vol. 1 (Ouderkerk aan den IJssel: Sound and Vision, 2006), 124–29.

² Other prints by Rembrandt had nicknames in the seventeenth century, but this moniker persisted through the ages, not only because of the print's extraordinary price, but also because the subject is difficult to give a proper and succinct title.

³ See my essay, "Rembrandt & Company" in Francesca Herndon-Consagra and Paul Crenshaw, *Rembrandt: Master Etchings from St. Louis Collections* (St. Louis: Saint Louis Art Museum, 2006), 119.

⁴ Hinterding, *Rembrandt as an Etcher*, vol. 1, 124–26.

⁵ The documentation is slender, but it seems likely that some collectors bought multiple impressions of the same print, to see and compare these different versions that Rembrandt would create. Arnold Houbraken, for example, suggested that collectors had to have both versions of the woman by the stove, the one with the key in the oven door and the one without (Houbraken, *De groote Schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen*, vol. 1 [Dordrecht: Arnold Houbraken, 1718], 259). While this may seem like a trivial example for Houbraken to cite, it is further evidence of Rembrandt's manipulation of the market demand for his work, constantly leading collectors and connoisseurs in new directions. The "collectable" nature of Rembrandt's prints has never subsided, and the Kemper Art Museum's impression of *The Three Crosses* has enjoyed prominent appreciation for centuries. The verso of *The Three Crosses* bears several notations and collectors' marks that allow us to trace much of its provenance. It was once possibly in the collection of the Hon. John Spencer (1708–1746) or his son George John, the second Earl Spencer (1758–1834). It passed via auction from their family to the dealer P. & D. Colnaghi of London, who sold it to the prominent Dutch collector Hendrikus Egbertus ten Cate (1868–1955), who owned several hundred paintings in addition to prints and drawings. It was acquired by Malvern B. Clopton (1875–1947) in New York from the dealer M. Knoedler and Company and was given to Washington University in 1930. Clopton, a surgeon and teacher at the Washington University School of Medicine who had served in World War I, donated more than a hundred prints and drawings, which remain in the Kemper Art Museum collection, including six prints by Rembrandt.

⁶ See Thomas E. Rassieur, "Looking over Rembrandt's Shoulder: The Printmaker at Work" in Clifford S. Ackley et al., *Rembrandt's Journey: Painter, Draftsman, Etcher* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2003), 45–60. These so-called Japanese papers (the Dutch also imported types from China and India) did not soak up ink in the same way as the thicker European papers, but instead tended to allow the ink to sit more readily on the surface.