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THE FRICK COLLECTION

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DIVINE ENCOUNTER: *REMBRANDT'S ABRAHAM AND THE ANGELS*

**DOSSIER EXHIBITION PRESENTS IN-DEPTH LOOK AT THE ARTIST'S
DEPICTIONS OF THE BIBLICAL STORY**

May 30 through August 20, 2017



Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669), *Abraham Entertaining the Angels*, 1646, oil on oak panel, private collection; photo: courtesy The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY

Beginning in the late 1630s and increasingly through the 1640s, Rembrandt shifted away from the dynamic movement of his earlier work towards imagery characterized by stillness and calm. These are the defining qualities of the artist's *Abraham Entertaining the Angels* of 1646, in which a momentous episode of divine revelation unfolds in the most hushed of ways—dramatic action replaced by subtle gesture and an astonishing luminosity, all within a panel measuring fewer than nine inches wide. On loan from a private collection and displayed publicly for the first time in more than ten years, this extraordinary painting is the

centerpiece of a small exhibition dedicated to Rembrandt's depictions of Abraham and his various encounters with God and his angels, as recounted in the book of Genesis. In the panel and in the other works included in the show—a tightly focused selection of prints and drawings and a single copper plate—Rembrandt explored, in different media, the nature of divine presence and the ways it was perceived. *Divine Encounter: Rembrandt's Abraham and the Angels* is organized by Joanna Sheers Seidenstein, Anne L. Poulet Curatorial Fellow at The Frick Collection, who also wrote the accompanying catalogue. Sheers Seidenstein comments, "We are privileged to have the opportunity to exhibit this painting, which contains one of Rembrandt's most creative treatments of the divine—a glowing figure who appears to dematerialize from mortal flesh into light before our eyes. We hope our audiences will enjoy

engaging deeply with this work and with Rembrandt's other treatments of the Abraham story, which fascinated the artist throughout his career.”

Major funding for the exhibition is provided by the Isabel and Alfred Bader Fund, a Bader Philanthropy; the David Berg Foundation; and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Additional support is generously provided by Otto Naumann Ltd., the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, and the Netherland-America Foundation.

REMBRANDT AND THE BIBLE

Depictions of stories from the Old Testament were highly popular in the predominantly Calvinist society of the Dutch Republic. Rembrandt's imagery often relates directly to Calvinist exegesis, particularly that contained within the notes of the Dutch States Bible, a government-sponsored translation of the original Hebrew and Greek, first published in 1637. Yet the artist was also sensitive to the Bible's ambiguities and ultimately developed his own interpretations of the events described. The often enigmatic encounters between mortals and the divine in Genesis offered him especially fascinating pictorial challenges, all the more so in light of Calvinism's prohibition against corporeal representations of God, which Rembrandt evidently viewed less as a mandate and more as a prompt to devise new means for representing the divine and its perception. The story of Abraham, the first of the biblical patriarchs, is replete with such encounters. Through these episodes, Rembrandt examined the pictorial possibilities for portraying the confrontation of the material and the immaterial, the visible and the invisible.

ABRAHAM ENTERTAINING THE ANGELS

Rembrandt's *Abraham Entertaining the Angels* of 1646 (see illustration on previous page) depicts the foretelling of the birth of Isaac to the elderly Abraham and his wife, Sarah. This episode, from chapter 18 of Genesis, begins with the statement that the Lord *appeared* to Abraham. Following this opening verse, the text recounts the visit of three travelers, to whom Abraham offers a meal and water with which to wash their tired feet. While eating, the guests ask about Sarah, and one of them announces that she will give birth to a son in a year's time. Hearing this, the old woman laughs in disbelief, prompting the speaker—now identified in the text as God—to chastise her, asking, “Is anything too great for the Lord?” He thus reveals to the couple the divine and providential nature of his announcement.

Yet what Abraham and Sarah actually *saw* is not entirely evident from the biblical text. The States Bible sought to clarify this, explaining in a note that the guests were the Lord and two angels, all of whom “took human form for the duration of their visit.” Rather than portraying three human travelers, however, Rembrandt depicts three winged creatures and, through his extraordinary treatment of light, distinguishes one of them as the Lord. This gesturing figure at the center of the composition neither receives light from an external source nor radiates light in the form of a halo or aura. Instead, the substance of his body turns into light. Softly blended strokes of white inflected with yellow

and gray give the effect of light pulsing beneath the voluminous gown, pooling in its folds and seeping into the cloth on the table. From this radiant creature, light spreads across the scene, casting glinting reflections on the plate on the table and illuminating the other figures in a way that presents revelation as a gradual process. The angel with his back to the viewer largely retains the appearance of a traveler, his walking stick beside him and a dirty foot extending from beneath his robe. His wings are tucked behind his back—visible to us but not to Abraham or Sarah—and the light just grazes his forehead and cheek. The figure at left raises his wings and receives more of the light, his hand and chest glowing brightly, yet he eats, indicating that he has not shed his earthly body. The figure at center, however, spreads his wings, his resplendent form no longer flesh and blood but entirely divine.

At the same time, only the faintest glow reaches Abraham's arm, leaving his impassive face in shadow. Sarah, standing in the doorway behind him, is completely untouched by the light and shows no discernible reaction. The two look in the direction of their visitors, but they have not yet grasped what is taking place before their eyes. Rembrandt thus conveys a disconnect between sensory perception and cognition, portraying the couple at the cusp of revelation, suspended between seeing and understanding, darkness and light.

REMBRANDT REVISITS THE SUBJECT WITH A NEW APPROACH

Ten years later, in an etching richly accentuated with drypoint, Rembrandt returned to the subject of Genesis 18, taking a different approach to the representation of divine presence. Replacing the luminous, winged creature at the center of the painting is an older, bearded man. This corporeal representation of the Lord—an unusual occurrence in seventeenth-century Dutch art—frames revelation as a purely non-visual appearance. This figure and his two winged companions—more masculine and more individualized than their counterparts in the painting—are not in the process of transforming from human to heavenly form, but are both at once: the travelers Abraham sees with his eyes and the divine beings he is beginning to understand them to be. Their outward signs of divinity are not physical realities but expressions of their true, invisible nature, perceptible to the mortals in the scene only through their inner vision.



Rembrandt, *Abraham Entertaining the Angels*, 1656, etching and drypoint on Japanese paper (only state), National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.

Rembrandt emphasizes this contrast between what is and what appears to be with his inclusion, at the center of the image, of Ishmael, Abraham's firstborn, whom he fathered with the slave Hagar and whom, in Genesis 21, God commands the patriarch to banish as a consequence of Isaac's birth. For Rembrandt, the Abraham story was also a family drama centering around a father confronting the greatest of blessings, as well as the most devastating of losses. In this image of the former, Rembrandt foreshadows the latter. Ishmael turns away from the divine visitors and, by so doing, shows his faith in the announcement they make, as well as his understanding of its implications:

turning toward the wilderness to which he will be forced to flee, he enacts his destiny. In contrast, Sarah, whose laughter and disbelief in the visitors' message is in large part the focus of the biblical passage, stands in the shadowy recesses of the doorway, submerged in darkness; she looks toward the visitors, but fails to perceive their divine status. Here Rembrandt sets sight and faith in opposition, identifying sensory vision as a kind of blindness—the failure of inner vision. Between the two extremes represented by Ishmael and Sarah is Abraham. Looking down, averting his eyes from his guests, he slowly takes in the news while a subtle play of light and shadow, rendered with the velvety burr of a drypoint needle, spreads across the foreground—a suggestion of divine illumination and revelation in progress.

By the end of the seventeenth century, the copper plate on which Rembrandt created this scene had made its way into the hands of an unknown artist who painted a landscape on its reverse, sparing Rembrandt's etched surface—only rediscovered in 1996—from continual reprinting in subsequent centuries. The plate, also included in the exhibition, is thus a rare example that was not subject to any later reworking. It makes evident the contrast of light and dark around which Rembrandt structured the image, showing the dense crosshatching he employed to produce the shadows surrounding the doubtful Sarah and the minimal marks in and around the figure of Ishmael, who, as a result, appears brilliantly illuminated by the sun.

REMBRANDT'S CONTINUED EXPLORATION OF REVELATION



Rembrandt, *Sacrifice of Isaac*, 1655, etching and drypoint (only state),
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

The challenge of representing the unseen in pictorial form continually fascinated Rembrandt, and various other events from the Abraham narrative served as vehicles for his ongoing examination of the relationship between seeing and believing. In an etching of 1655, for example, he depicts the episode in Genesis 22 in which the Lord tests Abraham by commanding him to make a sacrifice of Isaac, only to send an angel to intervene at the last minute. Rembrandt had treated this subject in a monumental painting of 1635 (now in the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg). In it, he followed the longstanding pictorial tradition of presenting the scene as a physical—and visual—confrontation, even though the Bible describes the angel only as “calling out” to Abraham. In the etching as well as the painting, the artist depicts the divine messenger in the form of a youthful winged angel, yet in the print suggests that he is

an immaterial presence that is on some level perceived, but not seen, by Abraham. Accompanied by a stream of light that cuts through the sky, this creature embraces Abraham in a manner both restraining and comforting. The elderly man reacts, turning his head—but in response to what? Gazing past the angel, he seems to see through it, looking instead at the ram that can be seen in the shadows at left—its curved spine sharing a contour with the angel's wing, its hind leg and tail immediately to the left of his billowing sleeve. The sacrificial animal, provided by the Lord as a

replacement for Isaac (according to the biblical passage), is the flesh and blood manifestation of the immaterial angel's intervention. Abraham's open mouth conveys his momentary confusion: as in Rembrandt's two depictions of Genesis 18, the patriarch only gradually takes in this divine intervention and its significance. His hand still gripping the knife, his eyes shrouded in darkness, he is again, in the artist's interpretation, suspended between sight and comprehension.

An earlier passage, from Genesis 17, offered Rembrandt yet another opportunity to explore the perception of divine presence. One of the other instances in the bible in which God "appears" to Abraham, this is the episode in which the Lord establishes his covenant with the patriarch. In a large drawing, the artist depicted this especially momentous event with a dazzling mass of energetic marks. Between and around these thick, inky



Rembrandt, *God the Father Supported by Angels*, ca. 1656–58, pen and brown ink on laid paper, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Widener collection (1942.9.666)

lines, the untouched paper gleams, creating the effect of intense light, amidst which the Lord, carried by two cherubim, descends to earth in a

swirl of drapery and clouds. In response, an overcome Abraham drops his walking stick and, as in the biblical text, falls to the ground. Completely prostrate, he buries his face in his hands, physically unable to take in with his eyes the splendor before him. Rembrandt presents to us what the patriarch knows to be present but cannot see. This drawing, one of two lent to the show from the Kupferstich-Kabinett in Dresden, will be displayed for the first time with a related sheet from the National Gallery of Art in Washington, in which Rembrandt further elaborates the figure of the Lord.



Rembrandt, *God Announcing His Covenant with Abraham*, ca. 1656–58, pen and ink on paper, Kupferstich-Kabinett, Dresden (C 1327); photo: Herbert Boswank

Throughout Rembrandt's various treatments of the story of Abraham, light is a constant. Whether using brush, pen, or etching needle, the artist employed light not just to signal the presence of God and his angels but to suggest the complex process of cognition, or enlightenment, that mortals undergo in the face of the miraculous. Distinguishing between physical sight and spiritual vision, Rembrandt characterized revelation as an intellectual and emotional, rather than sensory, experience.

PUBLICATION

The exhibition is accompanied by an illustrated catalogue written by Joanna Sheers Seidenstein, Anne L. Poulet Curatorial Fellow, and published in association with D Giles Limited. The book (hardback, 72 pages, 31 illustrations; **\$24.95, members \$22.50**) is available in the Museum Shop or can be ordered through the Frick's Web site (www.frick.org) and by phone at 212.547.6848.

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App: frick.org/app

Where: 1 East 70th Street, near Fifth Avenue

Museum Hours: open six days a week: 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. on Tuesdays through Saturdays; 11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on Sundays. Closed Mondays, New Year's Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas Day. Limited hours (11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.) on Lincoln's Birthday, Election Day, and Veterans Day

Admission: \$22; senior citizens \$17; students \$12; "pay what you wish" on Sundays from 11 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

First Fridays: museum admission and gallery programs are free from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. on the first Friday evening of the month (except January)

PLEASE NOTE TO YOUR READERS: Children under ten are not admitted to the Collection

Subway: #6 local to 68th Street station; #Q to 72nd Street station; Bus: M1, M2, M3, and M4 southbound on Fifth Avenue to 72nd Street and northbound on Madison Avenue to 70th Street

Tour Information: included in the price of admission is an Acoustiguide Audio Tour of the permanent collection. The tour is offered in six languages: English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, and Spanish.

Shop: The shop is open the same days as the Museum, closing fifteen minutes before the institution.

Group Visits: Please call 212.288.0700 for details and to make reservations.

Public Programs: A calendar of events is published regularly and is available upon request.

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For further press information, please contact Alexis Light, Senior Manager of Media Relations & Marketing; Phone: 212.547.0710; E-mail: mediarelations@frick.org