

The painting depicts a dramatic scene where three angels, dressed in white and with large, feathered wings, are seated on the ground. They are surrounded by a group of men, including Abraham, who is seated on the right, wearing a brown robe and a turban. The scene is set in a dark, cavernous space with a large, gnarled tree trunk in the background. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the figures against the dark background. The overall mood is one of divine presence and human awe.

Divine Encounter

*Rembrandt's Abraham
and the Angels*



Rembrandt and the Unseen

Perception and Revelation in the Abraham Narrative

Chapter 18 of Genesis begins with the explicit statement that the Lord *appeared* to Abraham (in the Hebrew, *vayerá*, literally “was seen by” him). Immediately following this verse is an enigmatic account relating the visit of three travelers to whom Abraham offers food, water, and rest. While eating, the guests ask about Abraham’s aged wife, Sarah, and one of them announces that she will give birth to a son in a year’s time. Hearing this, Sarah laughs in disbelief, prompting the speaker—now identified in the text as God himself—to chastise her, asking, “Is anything too great for the Lord?” He thus reveals to Abraham and Sarah the divine and providential nature of this visitation. What we are to understand about what the couple *saw*, however, is not readily evident. Rembrandt treated this episode on two occasions: in a tiny painted panel

of 1646 (cat. 1) and in an etching made ten years later (cat. 2). In these works, both known as *Abraham Entertaining the Angels*, the artist grapples, in strikingly different ways, with the nature of this divine encounter and the complexities of its representation in pictorial form.

This painting and etching are two of several works in which Rembrandt treated episodes from the life of Abraham. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, Abraham is the progenitor of the Jewish people, the individual with whom God makes his everlasting covenant, promising descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. The patriarch's story unfolds over the course of several chapters in Genesis, the first book of the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, and is replete with encounters with the divine, among them, the Lord's command to Abraham to settle in Canaan; the establishment of the covenant; the foretelling of the birth of his and Sarah's son, Isaac; the call to banish Abraham's firstborn, Ishmael; and the subsequent command to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah. In some instances, the Lord only speaks to Abraham; in another, the "word of God" comes to him "in a vision"; in yet others, *malachim* (messengers, or angels) speak to or approach the patriarch; and in three episodes, including Genesis 18, the Lord himself appears to him. The Abraham narrative held a place of central importance in the predominantly Calvinist society of the Dutch Republic, foremost as the story of a covenant that, according to Calvin, was one and the same with Christ's promise to all mankind.¹ Rembrandt's imagery often relates



Cat. 1

Rembrandt, *Abraham Entertaining the Angels*, 1646

Oil on oak panel

6 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 8 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches (16.1 × 21.1 cm)

Private collection



Cat. 2

Rembrandt, *Abraham*

Entertaining the Angels, 1656

Etching and drypoint on

Japanese paper, only state

6 $\frac{5}{16}$ \times 5 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches (16.1 \times 13 cm)

National Gallery of Art,

Washington; New Century

Fund

specifically to Calvinist exegesis.² At the same time, the artist was highly receptive to other sources and stimuli—the largely Catholic pictorial tradition he had inherited and the cosmopolitan culture of seventeenth-century Amsterdam, among others. Ultimately, his interests were as much intellectual as they were spiritual. Viewing Calvinism’s prohibition of anthropomorphic representations of God less as a mandate and more as a fascinating artistic challenge, he continually devised new means to convey divine presence. Rembrandt’s depictions of Genesis 18, along with his other images of the patriarch, demonstrate the artist’s evolving understanding of the relationship between sight and faith and of the nature of revelation. With these works, he raised major questions about the divine and human perception thereof.

ACTION/REACTION

Encounters between mortals and immortals, drawn from both Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman sources, were long-favored subjects in European art. Their encapsulation of a story into a single, pivotal moment, usually involving some reversal of fortune, made them ideal for independent easel paintings. As Albert Blankert observed, such reversals, wherein one emotional state gives way to another, appealed enormously to Rembrandt, who early in his career mastered the depiction of fleeting

motion and emotion, as, for example, in his *Sacrifice of Isaac* of 1635 (fig. 1).³ This monumental work, the artist's first painting of a scene from the Abraham narrative, treats the episode from Genesis 22 in which the patriarch, obeying God's command, proceeds to take his son Isaac's life but is stopped at the last moment by a messenger of the Lord. Although the text of Genesis describes the messenger only as "calling out" to Abraham, artists had long depicted the scene as a physical, and visual, encounter. Rembrandt follows this pictorial tradition, showing a winged angel grasping the patriarch's wrist. Even more than his predecessors, he seeks to capture the instantaneity with which Abraham sees and reacts to this intervention. Looking directly at the youthful angel, behind whose wings the sky breaks open with divine light, Abraham expresses both surprise and understanding. His mouth falls open and his eyes fill with tears, his sorrow turning to relief. Most remarkably, his hand is shown releasing the knife, which appears in mid-air. It was in regard to another painting, *The Resurrection of Christ* (Alte Pinakothek, Munich), in which a sword similarly slips from a startled soldier's hand and tumbles through the air, that Rembrandt articulated, in 1639, his sole documented comment about art making: his aim to observe "the most natural motions."⁴ In that work, as in the *Sacrifice of Isaac*, the sight of the miraculous yields an immediate reaction discernible in the motions of both body and mind. As we will see, however, Rembrandt's understanding of "the most natural motions" would change over time.

Fig. 1 Rembrandt, *Sacrifice of Isaac*, 1635. Oil on canvas, 75 ¹/₁₆ × 51 ¹/₁₆ inches (193 × 132 cm). State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

