



## **A REMBRANDT FINDS ITS WAY HOME: AN ETCHED COPPERPLATE SHEDS LIGHT ON THE ARTISTIC PROCESS**

**FOR THREE DECADES, A SMALL COPPERPLATE DEPICTING THE STONING OF SAINT STEPHEN, ETCHED BY REMBRANDT VAN RIJN IN 1635, WAS THE TREASURED POSSESSION OF SIR SIMON SCHAMA, THE HISTORIAN, WRITER, ART CRITIC, AND TELEVISION PRESENTER, AND THE LEADING GENETICIST DR. VIRGINIA PAPAIOANNOU. IN 2023, AFTER THE COUPLE DECIDED IT SHOULD BE RETURNED TO THE DUTCH MASTER'S NATIVE LAND, THE PLATE TRAVELED FROM THEIR HOME IN WESTCHESTER COUNTY, NEW YORK, TO AMSTERDAM. THE PIECE CAN NOW BE ADMIRER AT THE RIJKSMUSEUM, WHERE IT GIVES VISITORS A NEW APPRECIATION OF REMBRANDT'S GENIUS AS A PRINTMAKER.**

Between 1627 and 1665, Rembrandt van Rijn, one of the most prominent printmakers of all time, created more than 300 etched copperplates. One of these rare-to-find copperplates depicts the stoning of Saint Stephen, who is considered the first Christian martyr. For Taco Dibbits, Director General of the Rijksmuseum,

the Rembrandt copperplate is not only a remarkable work of art. It reveals how one of the world's greatest printmakers produced his etchings, from metal to paper. "You're standing there looking over the shoulder of the artist," he says.





Enabling other people to experience this was a strong motivation for Sir Simon Schama and Dr. Papaioannou to gift the etching plate to the Rijksmuseum. "We knew that because copper plates were few and far between in collections, it absolutely should be seen by the public," says Sir Simon Schama. "So while people have been very kind and have said, 'How generous Ginny and Simon are,' we thought of it as a very straightforward decision."

#### **WITNESSING A MASTER AT WORK**

Created by Rembrandt in 1635 and depicting the powerful scene of the stoning of Saint Stephen, this copper plate is small, fitting into the palm of a hand. But as an art object it has great significance. It offers a glimpse into both Rembrandt's mind and the process through which one of the world's most accomplished printmakers produced an etching.

In etching, the artist uses a needle to draw onto a copper plate covered in a layer of wax. When immersed in acid, the chemical etches into parts of the metal not covered by wax. The artist can later make corrections and enhancements by drawing directly into the plate with a needle. The final print is a mirror image of the one on the plate. "What you're getting is an incredible creative mental double act," says Sir Simon Schama.

"You're getting the first thoughts of the artist on how to do this, and the other side of his brain, which is always thinking about how it's going to look in reverse."

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**TACO DIBBITS**

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For Sir Simon Schama, Rembrandt's etchings hold a particular fascination. "There's something about working on metal that, to me, is absolutely thrilling," he emphasizes. "Scratching as an artistic mark is so different from painting or drawing—you have to get the traction and at the same time the mobility." Rembrandt certainly achieves mobility in this etching plate. He brings what Sir Simon Schama describes as "the maximum dynamic fury" to a small, compressed scene where figures are crowded into the frame. "He's doing an immense drama on a postage stamp," he says. "It has this extraordinary experimental daring to it."

While the subject is one of extreme violence, Rembrandt endows it with humanity in his empathy for the Saint's suffering, along with a lively cast of characters, each depicted with a distinct personality. "He makes it into such a human moment," says Dibbits. "And that tension between the beautiful and the ugly, the good and the bad, is incredible—that's what art is about."

### A FOND FAREWELL

Sir Simon Schama saw his first Rembrandt painting as a nine-year-old boy. Standing in front of one of the artist's self-portraits, he experienced what he describes as an "astonishing sense of a powerful presence." This close connection with the artist has stayed with him throughout his career. So, it is not surprising that while Sir Simon Schama was writing the art-historical biography "Rembrandt's Eyes"—an exploration of the



artist's work, the world in which he lived, and the forces that shaped his art—the etching plate sat on his desk.

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What's more surprising, at least to Sir Simon Schama, is that he acquired it in the first place. In 1993, on hearing of the sale of the Rembrandt etching plates in a London gallery, he found himself standing beside museum directors and print collectors with no intention of buying anything himself. Then, in one corner of the gallery, he noticed the smallest of the plates on sale. "I was mesmerized," he says. "And just out of curiosity, I asked how much it was. "As it turned out, the price was about the same amount of money that he and Papaioannou were about to spend on a new kitchen. "So I phoned Ginny," he recalls. "I explained this to her and asked her, "What's it going to be?" Her response was instant and unequivocal. Of course, he should buy the plate.

Thirty years later, he and his family found themselves making a gift of the etching plate. The process was smooth. Through its Myriad ART service, Myriad USA helped navigate the legal, financial, and tax complexities involved in donating art abroad. "We get a tax break, and that's nice to have, but also, they made the process extremely easy," Sir Simon Schama explains.

Nevertheless, it was with a certain sadness that they said goodbye to the artwork they had spent so many years admiring. When the transport company arrived, Sir Simon Schama says he felt as if he were sending a family member on a long and dangerous journey. “The transporter came with hundreds of yards of bubble wrap for this tiny thing,” he recalls. “And he was fantastically brawny, which Rembrandt would have loved.” But for the family, parting has brought with it pleasure—the satisfaction of knowing that, among the Rijksmuseum’s millions of visitors, many will discover the thrill of looking directly into the mind of a creative genius.

#### **A GIFT MORE VALUABLE THAN MONEY**

When Sir Simon Schama phoned Dibbits to offer the etching plate as a gift to the museum, the call came out of the blue. “It was a surprise, but it was a wonderful surprise,” says the Rijksmuseum Director. He already had a working relationship with Sir Simon Schama, who had filmed in the museum and had written about it when it reopened after a decade-long renovation. They were also both experts on Rembrandt’s work.

However, they shared something else as well: a belief in the public nature of art. “We both believe that people have the right to have access to art,” says Dibbits. “And in very different ways, we both work for one cause, a public cause. If you write about art or work in a museum, you feel people should have contact with works of art.”

In the case of the Rembrandt etching plate, the public will also have access to an object of great rarity. While Rembrandt made more than 310 etchings, only 83 of his etching plates survive.

“They weren’t really collected,” explains Dibbits. “They were considered a working material.” As a result, only a handful were in public ownership in the Netherlands, with just one in the Rijksmuseum dated around the 1650s. The Schama gift gives the museum a second one and from an earlier period in Rembrandt’s artistic career.

And while Sir Simon Schama shares Dibbits’ belief in the importance of the plate being seen by the wider public, he has another, simpler explanation for why he and Papaioannou decided to give it to the museum.

“We wanted it to go home,” he says.

[www.rijksmuseum.nl/en](http://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en)

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