

NEW RESEARCH

FERDINAND

GOVERT

# Bol and Flink

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FERDINAND BOL (1616-1680)

Ferdinand Bol, born in 1616, was one of several artists from the city of Dordrecht who found their way to Rembrandt's workshop in Amsterdam, where Bol moved in 1636 after completing an apprenticeship with Benjamin Gerritsz Cuyp. Bol's independent career as a painter specializing in history paintings and portraits began in 1640 but really took off in the 1650s, when an advantageous marriage brought him into contact with a network of patrons that included Amsterdam regents and members of the Admiralty. Like Flinck, Bol participated in the decoration of the Amsterdam Town Hall, the centrepiece of the city's power and authority and the most prestigious artistic commission of the 1650s. Bol died in 1680, but it appears he stopped painting after his second marriage in 1669. In addition to paintings and drawings, Bol is the only known Rembrandt student who produced a substantial number of etchings.



GOVERT FLINCK (1615-1660)

Govert Flinck was born into a Mennonite family in Cleves in 1615. Around 1630 he moved to Leeuwarden to study with the painter, art dealer, and Mennonite preacher Lambert Jacobsz. In about 1633-1634, Flinck moved to Amsterdam, where he joined the workshop run by Jacobsz's business partner, Hendrick Uylenburgh. There he encountered Rembrandt van Rijn, from whom he took over as Uylenburgh's *chef d'atelier* in 1635. Flinck produced history paintings, portraits, and character studies as well as the occasional landscape. Praised by authors such as Joost van den Vondel and Joachim von Sandrart, his work was purchased by elite patrons not only in Amsterdam, but also at the courts of Orange and Brandenburg. Since his own time, Flinck has been both admired and criticised as an early proponent of the 'clear' style that replaced Rembrandt's earthy impasto and dramatic chiaroscuro with a smoother touch and brighter palette. Flinck was at the height of his fame when he died in 1660 at the age of only forty-five.

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 BOOKS

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0.1 GOVERT FLINCK *Annunciation to the Shepherds*, 1639,  
canvas, 160 x 196 cm, Paris, Louvre, inv.nr. 1291.

Photo: © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource / Tony Querrac

INTRODUCTION:

# Rising stars in Rembrandt's Amsterdam

STEPHANIE S. DICKEY

Over the course of a career that spanned more than forty years, Rembrandt mentored dozens of artists in Leiden and Amsterdam. His approach as a teacher was relatively free – he often allowed students to create their own compositions rather than strictly copying his – but his impact could be overwhelming. Hundreds of anonymous, ‘Rembrandtesque’ paintings still exist to challenge the connoisseurial eye with their close adherence to the master’s treatment of brushwork, colour, and light. Yet, a few ambitious artists, beginning with Gerrit Dou in Leiden,<sup>1</sup> developed their own distinctive styles and successful careers. The question of how they did so has occupied theorists from their own time until today.<sup>2</sup> Should we describe the pursuit of independence as a rejection of Rembrandt’s manner, or a transformation of it? This question is fundamental to how the art of two of Rembrandt’s most successful followers, Govert Flinck and Ferdinand Bol, has been understood from their own time until today.

After 1640, many artists in Amsterdam responded to a shift in prevailing taste among elite patrons that replaced Rembrandt’s evocative shadows and earthy palette with a ‘clear’ style featuring bright colours and graceful forms. As Eric Jan Sluijter argues in the first chapter of this book, this shift was as much pragmatic as ideological: artists adapted their approach to suit the increasingly elegant lifestyles of an upwardly mobile younger generation of art patrons and a developing market for fitted paintings that would blend graciously into the stately décor of grand homes and public buildings.

Rembrandt maintained a resolute independence from fashion, yet, contrary to legend, he continued to find a market for his late works among connoisseurs who could appreciate their aesthetic subtleties and profound emotional content.<sup>3</sup> His audacity has long resonated with viewers who value personal authenticity even, or especially, when it comes at the expense of



0.2 REMBRANDT *Annunciation to the Shepherds*, 1634, etching, 260 x 220 mm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv.nr. RP-P-1962-19



0.3 REMBRANDT *The Angel Raphael departing from the Family of Tobias*, 1637, panel, 66 x 52 cm, Paris, Louvre, inv.nr. 1736.  
Photo: © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource / Erich Lessing

commercial success. Yet, in recent years, a growing interest in the history of collecting, the art market, and the commodification of visual culture has brought new attention and respect to other seventeenth-century artists whose accomplishments earned stellar success in their own lifetimes, if not veneration in the long term.

Thus, while the field of Rembrandt studies is still dominated by attention to the master himself, the achievements of his most talented associates are beginning to attract sustained inquiry. The standard monographic studies on both Flinck and Bol are now decades old,<sup>4</sup> and most accounts have focused on their relationship to Rembrandt. Yet, in recent years, methods ranging from provenance research to technical analysis have begun to clarify their contributions to the thriving art market in which they rose to prominence. The studies assembled here bring together a variety of new insights into their patronage, painting techniques, and intellectual milieu. This book joins the exhibition *Ferdinand Bol and Govert Flinck: Rembrandt's Master Pupils* in bringing new attention to two artists who gained renown both because of their association with Rembrandt and because of the entrepreneurial spirit with which they developed distinctive mature styles.



## Two artists

In Amsterdam, Rembrandt was surrounded by acolytes from his arrival in the early 1630s to his death in 1669.<sup>5</sup> Of these, the first of real consequence were Flinck and Bol. Like Rembrandt, both moved to Amsterdam (Flinck from Cleves by way of Leeuwarden, Bol from Dordrecht), just as the urban art market was beginning to take off. Both concentrated their efforts on history painting and portraiture, the two subject categories most likely to lead to profit and acclaim.<sup>6</sup> Flinck was already well-trained by Lambert Jacobsz in Leeuwarden, as discussed here by Jasper Hillegers, when he joined Rembrandt's Amsterdam workshop, most likely staying for at least one year before taking over Rembrandt's former position as manager in the 'academy' of the art dealer Hendrick Uylenburgh.<sup>7</sup> Uylenburgh's business relations with Jacobsz (and the fact that both were, like Flinck's family, Mennonites) certainly played a role in this.<sup>8</sup>

Flinck's relationship to Rembrandt must be understood as one component of a business venture directed by Jacobsz and Uylenburgh, and in which we must also include Jacob Backer, seven years older than Flinck and an important role model for his early development (Arnold Houbraken says they were roommates in Leeuwarden).<sup>9</sup> Together they built demand in the Amsterdam art market not only for the kind of small-scale history paintings already well-established by Pieter Lastman and his circle, but also for compositions featuring a few large-scale figures (numerous examples are illustrated here). This brought Dutch history painting into direct relation with the imposing canvases of the Flemish master Peter Paul Rubens and Italian artists like Caravaggio and Guercino (also avidly collected by Amsterdam art lovers with international connections).<sup>10</sup> It might be argued that the capacity to 'go big' played a role in preparing Flinck and also Bol for the stupendous commissions they later received for the Amsterdam Town Hall.<sup>11</sup>

Bol was about twenty years old when he joined Rembrandt's workshop, most likely in 1636 or 1637, and must already have received basic training in Dordrecht, possibly from Benjamin Cuyp.<sup>12</sup> Bol was the first of several Dordtenaars who found their way to Rembrandt's milieu, along with Samuel van Hoogstraten, Nicolaes Maes, and later Aert de Gelder. At one remove was Cornelis Bisschop, one of Bol's few known pupils, whose later career in Dordrecht, discussed here by Justus Lange, reflects the impact of both Bol and Maes.

Bol's first known signed and dated painting is from 1640, suggesting that he stayed with Rembrandt for several years.<sup>13</sup> Like Flinck and many other artists in Amsterdam, he was deeply affected by Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait at Age Thirty-Four* (1640) and emulated it in his own work (see figs. 12.1 and 13.7).<sup>14</sup> He may have witnessed the creation of Rembrandt's famous group portrait, *The Night Watch*, completed in 1642.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, Flinck was well-established enough by then to create his own group portrait for the governors of the Kloveniersdoelen.<sup>16</sup> Bol's subsequent success was due in large part to successful cultivation of a patronage network. Yet there are flashes of technical brilliance, particularly in the stately portraits of his mature years (see fig. 6.1 and 11.1).



1.5 GOVERT FLINCK *The Company of Captain Albert Bas and Lieutenant Lucas Conijn*, 1645, canvas, 347 x 244 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv.nr. SK-C-371



1.6. NICOLAES LAUWERS AFTER PETER PAUL RUBENS *The Adoration of the Magi*, ca. 1620-1630, engraving, 616 x 4545 mm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv.nr. RP-P-1887-A-12010

with which their audience, and they themselves, were familiar. As we shall see, they created a style that was recognized by this audience as appropriate for their public commissions and for specific paintings in the reception rooms of their own houses.

That working for this new segment of the art market implied a different relationship to one's audience can be gathered from several sources. Erna Kok demonstrated that both Flinck and Bol mainly worked within carefully built elite networks of patrons who were closely related to each other.<sup>14</sup> By doing this, she argued, they positioned themselves outside the contingencies of the 'open' market. Most Dutch painters had become used to working 'on spec' with a certain audience in mind – for one's own stock or to sell through dealers – which meant that it was of paramount importance to build up an artistic reputation among art lovers and collectors, as Rembrandt and Gerrit Dou had magnificently done.<sup>15</sup> For such artists it was more important to have ties with art dealers and collectors than to maintain close relations within specific networks of the social elite. It is striking that, in contrast to Rembrandt, one does not find works by Flinck and Bol in the few inventories of art dealers known to us. Even Johannes



1.7 GOVERT FLINCK *Bathsheba pleading with David to appoint Solomon as his Successor*, 1651, canvas, 105 x 152 cm, Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland, inv.nr. 64

de Renialme, who owned six history paintings by Rembrandt (and a few *tronies* and [self]portraits) had no works by Flinck or Bol in his huge stock of 586 paintings (1657).<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, also in contrast to Rembrandt, we do not know about other intermediaries or gentleman-dealers interested in these artists' works.<sup>17</sup> That they worked for a different section of the market seems to be confirmed by the fact that, again in contrast to Rembrandt, one barely finds history paintings by Flinck or Bol in inventories. I am suggesting here that this is probably due to the fact that these were more often than not *nagelvast*: permanently fixed in their planned locations as chimney pieces, overdoor paintings, or in the panelling of the walls of the room; such works were normally not mentioned with the movable goods in inventories because they belonged to the structure of the house. In the rare case that we do come across a record of important history paintings by Bol in an inventory, the document regards paintings which indeed were fixed in the panelling of the room (a depiction of the goddess Semele) or in the chimney breast (a painting identified by Grijzenhout as representing the owners in the guise of Jason and Medea).<sup>18</sup> In contrast, except for Rembrandt's contribution to the Batavian cycle commissioned for the Amsterdam Town Hall, for which the burgomasters for once tried to include the most renowned history painter of Amsterdam, and the exceptional commission for the Genoa altarpiece(s) from a patron who must have wished to have an unusual kind of *tenebroso* painting (a style favoured in the second half of the century in such cities as Genoa, Naples, and Venice), we know of no commissions to Rembrandt for history paintings to



2.1. **LAMBERT JACOBZ** *Saint Paul*, 1629, canvas, 114.4 x 99.6 cm, sale, London, Sotheby's, 6 December 2012, lot 138



2.2. **JAN LIEVENS** *Saint Paul*, ca. 1627-1628, canvas, 119 x 108 cm, Stockholm, Nationalmuseum, inv.nr. NM 7087

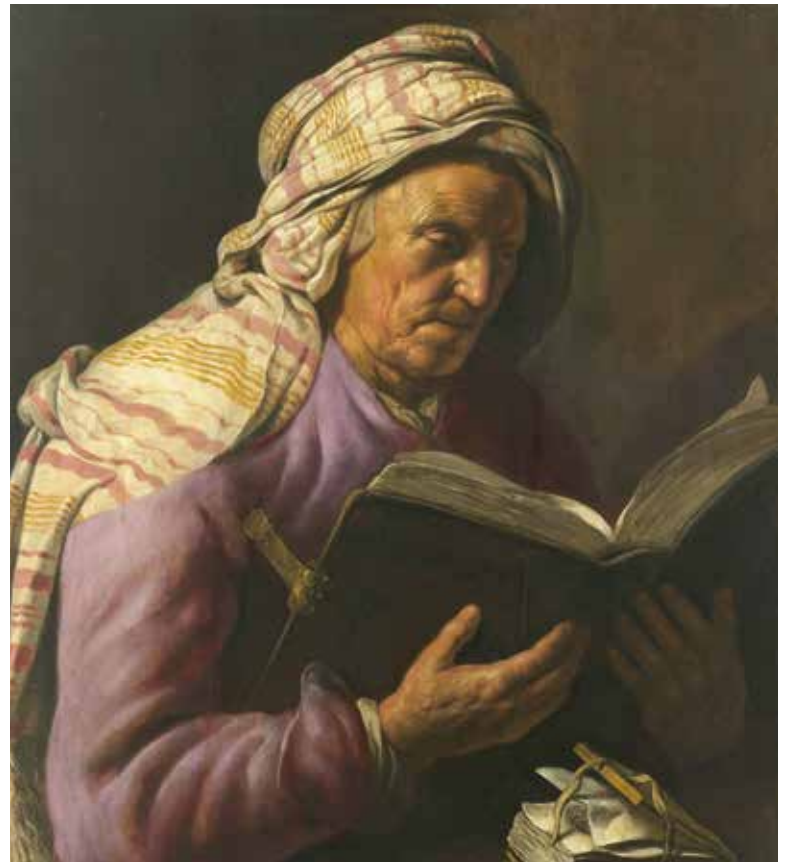
Govert Flinck's parents went to listen. And they were extremely edified by his preaching. And hearing that he was also a prestigious painter, they changed their minds altogether, and decided right then and there to talk to this Lambert Jacobsz. And they instantly agreed that he would take their son to Leeuwarden, in his house and under his tutelage, and that he would teach him the Art [of Painting]. Since then this Flinck has often said that he has never in his life received such joyful news as when they told him this. Arriving in Leeuwarden he found in Jacob Backer a suitable and zealous roommate and companion in the Art, who went with him (after they were so advanced that they could spread their wings) to Amsterdam, where Flinck, since he had prosperous *bloedvrienden* [relatives] living there, found a first chance to demonstrate his Art.<sup>2</sup>

This instructive anecdote tells us much not only about the young Flinck but also about Lambert Jacobsz, whom Houbraken does not grant his own biography.<sup>3</sup> Born around 1598 within Amsterdam's Mennonite community – the poet Joost van den Vondel was a friend of the family and Lambert's older brother was the well-known preacher Anthonius Roscius – Lambert probably received his training as a painter with Jan Pynas.<sup>4</sup> In 1620 he married Aeghe Theunisdr from Leeuwarden and in 1621 became a citizen there, making a career as a successful painter of small-scale histories in the style of the Amsterdam history painters now often





2.3. JAN LIEVENS *Old Usurer sharpening a Quill*, 1627/28, canvas, 127 x 107.5 cm, Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, on loan from Bankhaus Sal. Oppenheim



2.4. JAN LIEVENS *Old Woman Reading*, ca. 1626, panel, 78 x 68 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv.nr. SK-A-4702

known as the ‘pre-Rembrandtists’. From Houbraken’s words we understand that Lambert enjoyed an international reputation as a Mennonite teacher, and that he travelled at least as far as Cleves – more than 160 kilometres from Leeuwarden – to preach. Apparently, at this point in his career Lambert was interested in bringing back a young, talented apprentice from Cleves to faraway Leeuwarden. Moreover, from Amsterdam he had already scooped up an assistant shortly before: Jacob Backer, with whom Lambert had Mennonite family ties.<sup>5</sup>

## Business expansion

Lambert’s painted oeuvre as known today consists of approximately sixty works that are safely attributable to him and his studio.<sup>6</sup> Of these paintings, twenty-three are dated. Yet only one – a small history painting – is dated before 1628.<sup>7</sup> One must therefore conclude that, initially, Lambert’s artistic activities were modest. Yet things were about to change. Lambert’s sudden interest in recruiting studio assistance seems to be the first indication that at the end of the 1620s he was preparing a business expansion. In addition to his small-figure work – we know of two such paintings from 1628<sup>8</sup> – Lambert must have developed the idea of starting a second ‘product line’ of large-figure history paintings (i.e., history paintings





# Technical examination of Govert Flinck's *Portrait of a Boy* (1640) in Birmingham

RUTH BUBB

**P***ortrait of a Boy* by Govert Flinck in the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham, was conserved in 2015 as the centrepiece of the exhibition *Flinck in Focus* (see fig. 7.1).<sup>1</sup> Treatment consisted of removing discolored varnish and restorations and relining the canvas in order to consolidate the fragile pictorial layers. Technical investigation comprised the examination of cross-sections,<sup>2</sup> pigment identification with polarised light microscopy (PLM<sup>3</sup>) and scanning electron microscopy with energy dispersive x-radiography (SEM-EDX<sup>4</sup>), infrared reflectography (IRR<sup>5</sup>) and surface microscopy.

## Support

The original support is a single piece of plain weave canvas. The left edge of the canvas appears to be a selvage. The right side was probably also a selvage but the pictorial layers continue to the edge with no 'fade out', suggesting that it has been trimmed. The width corresponds well to the commonly used Netherlandish loom width of 6/4 of an ell, roughly 105 cm.<sup>6</sup> Flinck often used canvas of similar dimensions for three-quarter length portraits.<sup>7</sup>

The thread count obtained from some very small areas of exposed original canvas is approximately sixteen ( $\pm 1$ ) threads per cm in both directions. This is slightly finer than most of the canvases used by Rembrandt, surveyed by Ernst van de Wetering, or that used by Flinck for his first major history painting, *Isaac blessing Jacob* (see fig. 2.14).<sup>8</sup> Van de Wetering had concluded that it was not Rembrandt's practice to cut canvases from a whole bolt stored in the studio. The corollary of this was that it might be possible to find matches with paintings made outside Rembrandt's studio by artists using the same suppliers.<sup>9</sup>



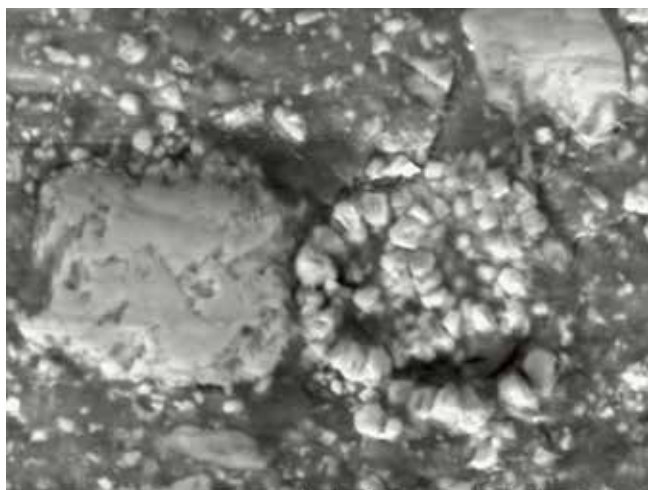
8.1. Attributed to **ADRIAEN VAN GAESBEECK**, *An Artist in his Studio*, ca. 1645, panel, 92.7 x 74.3 cm, Milwaukee, Milwaukee Art Museum, inv.nr. M1989.6, Gift of Friends of Art. Photo: Alamy



8.2. **GOVERT FLINCK** *Portrait of a Boy (David Leeuw)*, 1640, Birmingham, Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham: photomicrograph before varnish removal showing translucent spherical particles protruding through collar and sky. Photo: Ruth Bubb

Cusping, that is, distortion of the canvas weave between points of attachment to an auxiliary support, is visible intermittently along the right and left edges but not along the top and bottom.<sup>10</sup> The interval between arcs in the weave appears to be approximately 10 cm. The presence of cusping indicates that the canvas was initially stretched in an unprepared state, then stiffened and the weave distortion locked in by the application of glue size and priming. The absence of pronounced cusping from the top and bottom edges could mean that the canvas was cut from a longer prepared piece.<sup>11</sup> By this period, artists could purchase ready-primed canvases from specialized *doekpremuers*, who stretched and prepared metres of canvas at a time.<sup>12</sup>

Preparatory strainers would be larger than the canvas, so that the canvas would not touch the wooden bars. This was achieved by lacing the canvas onto the strainer with cord.<sup>13</sup> If the prepared canvas had been cut from a longer piece, as it appears this one was, it would have to be re-stretched onto a new support for painting. The edges could be folded and tacked around the sides of a strainer, as is common practice now, but contemporary images of artists' studios, and a few rare surviving examples, show that painters also worked on canvas laced to a wooden frame (fig. 8.1).<sup>14</sup> With this method, there is no crease or tacking margin around the edges and



8.3. Backscattered electron image of UV-fluorescent particle in the ground layer in cross section, showing an inclusion composed of plates stacked in a circular arrangement, indicative of a coccolith. Photo: Joanna Russell

it is possible to paint right up to and over the edge of the canvas. This appears to be the system Flinck used for this painting. The paint and ground layers at the left side continue over the selvage edge of the canvas. Several possible lacing holes, apparently containing the remains of thread covered by paint, were found.<sup>15</sup> The apparent lack of correspondence between the location of the holes and the pattern of cusping could be explained by the second stretching having taken place after the primary cusping was established at the priming stage.

## Preparation layers

The canvas would have been sized with animal glue to stiffen the fibres and reduce absorption of the paint binding media.<sup>16</sup> It was then prepared for painting with a cream-coloured ground layer. Pigment analysis by polarized light microscopy showed the ground to consist mainly of natural sedimentary chalk. Relatively small amounts of shattered quartz fragments, iron-oxide earth pigments, charcoal black and lead white were also identified.

Transparent, spherical particles are conspicuous in cross-section. Their diameter varies, the largest observed being around 400µm. Although most abundant in the ground layer, they also occur in several paint layers and in clusters on the surface (fig. 8.2). The material shares some of the optical characteristics of quartz sand when examined by polarised light microscopy. The possibility that the spheres could consist of lead soaps, created through the reaction of lead-containing pigments with a drying oil medium, was also considered. It has been suggested that this type of deterioration is linked to lead white made by the ‘Dutch stack’ process in the seventeenth century, and this cheaper grade of pigment was often adulterated with extenders such as chalk.<sup>17</sup> Further analysis of the samples with SEM-EDX confirmed that in all cases the rounded inclusions contained calcium, possibly with some organic matter in the centre (fig. 8.3). The inclusions were therefore identified as coccoliths, the calcified remains of micro-organisms found in natural chalks.

Karin Groen made detailed investigations of grounds used by Rembrandt and his contemporaries.<sup>18</sup> She found a number of single grounds on canvas composed mainly of chalk, or chalk and lead white, including several by Rembrandt, although these only occur after about 1650.<sup>19</sup> The ground of Flinck’s *Girl by a High Chair*, signed and dated the same year as the Barber portrait, is described as ‘whitish’, barely filling the canvas texture,<sup>20</sup> and the light-coloured ground of *Isaac*



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Of the many talented artists who worked with Rembrandt van Rijn in Amsterdam, none were more successful than Govert Flinck and Ferdinand Bol. Like Rembrandt, both trained elsewhere before making the audacious move to Amsterdam in the 1630s, a period of dynamic growth for the city that was fast becoming the cultural capital of northern Europe. In this volume of essays, art historians and conservation scientists present recent research that sheds new light on the activities of both Bol and Flinck: their painting techniques, patronage networks, intellectual milieu, and shifting critical fortunes. Several chapters explore their relationships with other artists: Lambert Jacobsz, Flinck's teacher in Leeuwarden, Jürgen Ovens, who worked closely with Flinck in Amsterdam, and Cornelis Bisschop, who studied with Bol.

Each in his own way, Flinck and Bol took the lessons learned from Rembrandt, developed their own styles, and garnered prestigious commissions and esteem. Based on a landmark international conference and produced to accompany the exhibition *Ferdinand Bol and Govert Flinck: Rembrandt's Master Pupils*, this book brings new attention to two brilliant painters who began their careers in Amsterdam as Rembrandt's acolytes and stayed to become his rivals.



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