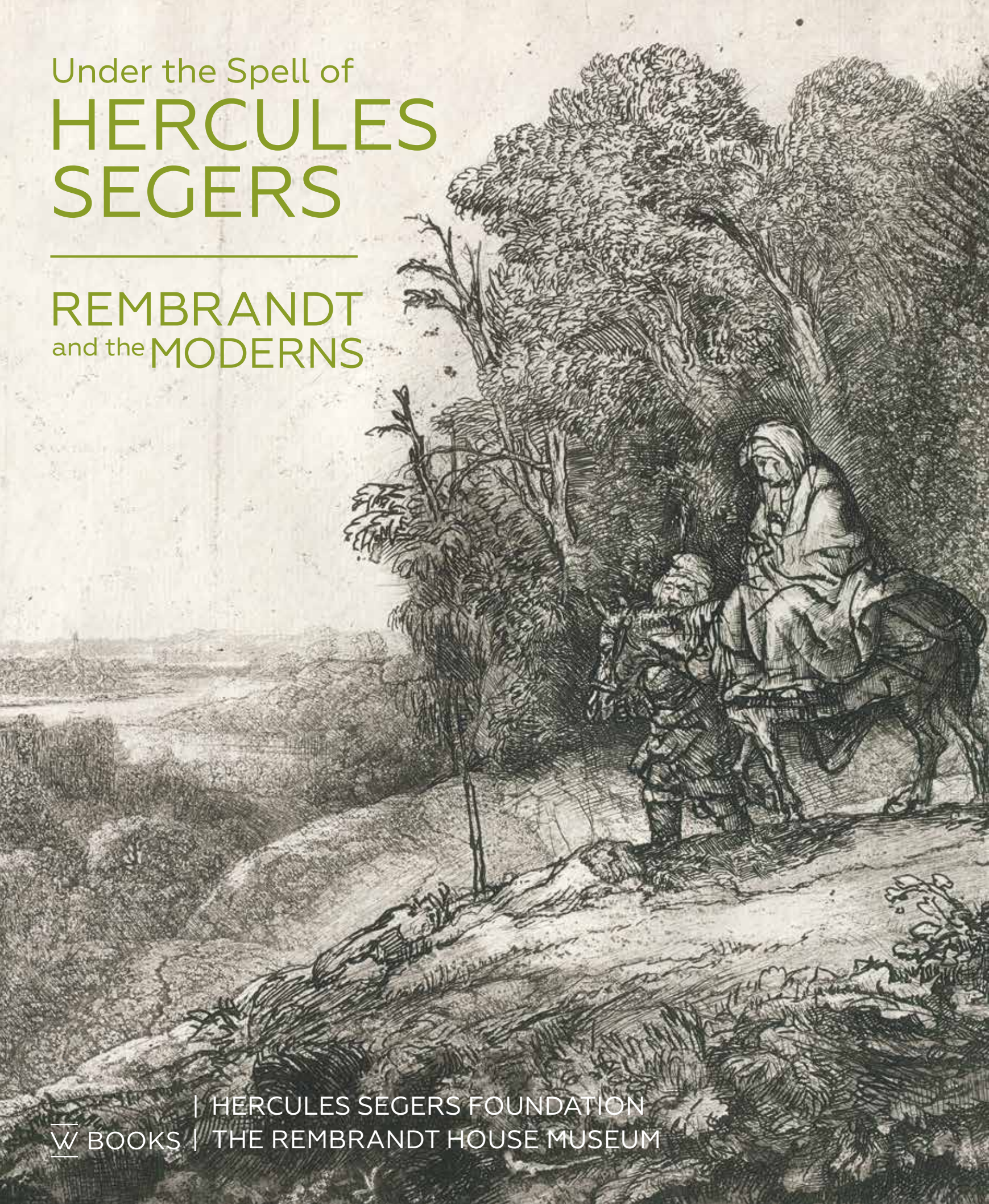


Under the Spell of
**HERCULES
SEGERS**

REMBRANDT
and the **MODERNS**



| HERCULES SEGERS FOUNDATION
W BOOKS | THE REMBRANDT HOUSE MUSEUM



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FOREWORD

Hercules Segers (1589/90-1633/40) is one of the most intriguing artists of the Golden Age. Highly appreciated in his lifetime, his distinctive paintings and prints still fascinate devotees and artists to this day. Rembrandt was his most prominent admirer, but twentieth-century artists like Max Ernst and contemporary artists such as Nono Reinhold and Robert Zandvliet are also vocal in their enthusiasm for Segers's quirky and extremely modern landscapes. There has never before been an exhibition exploring Segers's influence on other artists, and little has been written about the subject. The monographic exhibition on Hercules Segers being staged in the Rijksmuseum this autumn gives us the ideal opportunity to present this fascinating subject to the public and to readers.

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This book, written to accompany the exhibition *Under the Spell of Hercules Segers: Rembrandt and the Moderns*, is the result of a special project undertaken jointly by the Hercules Segers Foundation and the Rembrandt House Museum—a collaboration that goes to the heart of both organizations. The Hercules Segers Foundation was set up in 2001 with a mission to promote interest in the graphic arts and drawing with publications, exhibitions and more. In 2002 the foundation published a monograph on the Dutch etcher Charles Donker, swiftly followed by books about the printmakers Wendelien Schönfeld, Frans Pannekoek, the Swiss Gérard de Palézieux, the Austrian Jakob Demus and the Frenchman Erik Desmazières, the Utrecht artists' Society De Luis, the draftsman Peter Vos and, most recently, an oeuvre catalogue of the Hague etcher Simon Koene. Almost all these publications were produced to coincide with exhibitions staged in the Rembrandt House in Amsterdam. Since its foundation in 1907, the Rembrandt House Museum has also championed the graphic arts past and present, with—of course—a particular focus on Rembrandt's printmaking.

The strongest tie between the two organizations is the fact that Hercules Segers and Rembrandt were two of the greatest and most influential etchers ever. Rembrandt's role in the development of the arts has been much discussed. He trained many artists and had an unmistakable influence on others. At the same time, he sought inspiration from artists he admired, such as Hercules Segers, the eccentric Dutch landscape painter and printmaker. In 1656 Rembrandt owned at least eight paintings by Segers. It was not just his paintings that interested Rembrandt, the experimental character of Segers's prints fascinated him as well. And he must have shared his interest in Segers with his pupils, such as Philips Koninck, Jan Ruyscher and Pieter de With.



HOW AN ARTIST SHOULD CONDUCT HIMSELF AGAINST THE BLOWS OF FORTUNE

Another fitting example here is that of Hercules Segers, disregarded and yet a great artist: he flourished, or rather withered, during my first green years. His observation was sure and unwavering, particularly in his design of landscapes and compositions, with imaginary mountains and caves. It was as if he was pregnant with whole provinces, giving birth to them with immeasurable spaces, and picturing them to a marvel in his paintings and prints. He devoted himself to art with incomparable zeal: but what happened? No one wanted to look at his works in his lifetime: the printers took his prints by the basketful to the sellers of fats to wrap butter and soap, and most of them ended up as twists for pepper. Eventually he showed a plate, his ultimate masterpiece, to an art dealer in Amsterdam, offering it for very little money, but what happened? The dealer complained that there was no market for his works, and hardly thought it worthwhile even to pay the price of the copper. The wretched Hercules had to go home, disconsolate, taking his plate with him. After pulling a few prints from it, he cut it into pieces, saying that art lovers would come and would pay four times more for one impression than he had asked for the whole plate. And this came to pass, for each print has since been sold for sixteen ducats, and people were lucky to get one. Poor Hercules did not benefit at all, however. Although he even painted and printed on his shirts and the sheets from his bed (for he also printed paintings), he and his whole family remained in abject poverty, so that his dejected wife eventually complained that there was not a piece of linen left that had not been used for paintings or prints. The unhappy Hercules took this so much to heart that he was at his wits' end and tried to drown his sorrows in wine. One evening he came home drunk, a state to which he was not accustomed, and fell down the stairs and died. His death opened the eyes of all the art lovers, who have since then accorded his works the esteem they deserve, and always will deserve.¹

Samuel van Hoogstraten

¹ Van Hoogstraten 1678, p. 312.



UNDER THE SPELL OF HERCULES SEGERS

REMBRANDT AND HIS PUPILS

Mireille Cornelis & Leonore van Sloten

Early examples of Hercules Segers's influence on other artists are found in the workshop of Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669).¹ He himself and some of his pupils must have engaged with Segers's work. Rembrandt must have experienced a connection with Segers on several fronts. The most important appears to have been their shared interest in etching as an artistic medium. Rembrandt was a passionate etcher. In his lifetime he produced a sizeable oeuvre of some three hundred prints. Let us now explore how Rembrandt's interest in Segers manifested itself and in which ways Segers's work inspired Rembrandt and his pupils.

Rembrandt was one of the seventeenth-century artists who owned work by Segers. The inventory of his property drawn up in 1656 when he went bankrupt tells us that at that time he had no fewer than eight of Segers's paintings hanging on the walls of his house: 'In the entrance hall... a small landscape by Hercules Segers', 'In the anteroom ... a woodland scene by Hercules Segers' and 'some houses by Hercules Segers'. In the 'room behind the anteroom' there were 'two small landscapes by Hercules Segers'. In the 'back room or salon ... a large landscape by Hercules Segers' and 'a landscape in grisaille by Hercules Segers'. And finally another 'landscape by Hercules Segers' in 'the vestibule of the art cabinet'.² This is a considerable number of paintings by a single artist, certainly in relation to the make-up of the rest of Rembrandt's art collection. Around half the other paintings came from Rembrandt's workshop; six by Adriaen Brouwer, six by Jan Porcellis and eight by Jan Lievens. Rembrandt also owned a large collection of works on paper—close to eight thousand drawings and prints by important artists from the Netherlands and abroad.

He kept this collection in 'art books'—albums—usually grouped by genre or by artist's name. This collection may well have included prints by Segers, which could have been in one of the books of works by different artists who are not mentioned by name, such as an album of 'landscapes by various masters'.

Rembrandt clearly had several paintings by Segers but, importantly, he also managed to get hold of one of Segers's etching plates, which he then started to rework. It is a composition featuring Tobias and the angel Raphael, walking in a hilly landscape (fig. 12), a work Segers made from a print of 1613 (fig. 13) by his contemporary, the painter and printmaker Hendrick Goudt (1583-1648). In his turn Goudt had made his print after a painting by Adam Elsheimer (1578-1610), which we only know of today from copies (fig. 14). Goudt's prints contributed to the international spread of Elsheimer's name and reputation. Hendrick Goudt was particularly skilled in creating a certain tonality. He used a method all his own, in which a grid of engraved horizontal and vertical lines served as the basis for the dark areas of the composition. This is how he was able to translate the dramatic lighting so characteristic of Elsheimer's work into a reproductive print. Elsheimer and Goudt built up their landscape from a structure with four levels of depth, separated by trees and shrubs. This created four isolated 'grounds': the foreground, in which they placed two figures in front of a large group of trees, a middle ground, a mountainous background and, between the middle ground and the mountains, a fourth ground in a passage situated higher in the landscape.

In certain respects Hercules Segers followed Elsheimer's and Goudt's compositions freely, in others more literally. He kept the subject matter,



12.

Hercules Segers, *Tobias and the Angel*, c.1630-33,
etching, printed in olive green on paper, only state,
202/200 x 275/274 mm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum



13.
Hendrick Goudt (after Adam Elsheimer), *Tobias and the Angel*, 1613,
engraving, 259 x 252 mm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum,
on loan from the City of Amsterdam

14.
Anonymous, after Adam Elsheimer, *Tobias and the Angel*, c. 1650,
oil on copper, 19.3 x 27.6 cm, London, National Gallery

the same reason, but in a more subtle way. It is a fragile technique because the pressure of the printing press soon flattens the burrs. This means that only a few good impressions can be made. Using this technique contributes to the exclusivity of a successful example.

A second parallel is the production of prints in several states. There are various reasons for this.¹² The further development of the plate into a new state could arise from the need to rework worn lines. But an important artistic reason was the desire to further develop, elaborate or correct a composition. The production of prints in editions of several states had an additional financial advantage, since some print collectors wanted to have complete series of one print.

Both artists were able to give their prints greater tonality and make them individual by wiping the plate selectively. This method allowed the artists themselves to decide whether the sky was grey by leaving a thin film of ink on the plate, or bright by wiping the plate clean in that area.

Segers printed his works on European paper, but he also regularly used fabric (fig. 4). It is interesting that Rembrandt, like Segers, experimented with different supports: European paper, vellum, cartridge paper and, from around 1647 onwards, Japanese paper (figs. 19 and 20). The effect is unmistakable: *St Jerome Reading in an Italian Landscape* printed on European paper is vivid white, whereas the print on the yellowish *washi* (gampi) immediately places the scene in a sultry Italian afternoon.

Traces of the working process are visible on the upper left and right near the margin of this etching. Many of Rembrandt's etchings show



19.

Rembrandt, *St Jerome Reading in an Italian Landscape*,
c. 1654, etching, burin and drypoint,
printed on European paper,
state I (2), 259 x 210 mm,
Amsterdam, The Rembrandt House Museum

similar traces.¹³ One good example is his *Virgin and Child in the Clouds*, in which the face of a previously etched figure can still be seen in the new composition (fig. 21). And in some cases traces like these have even resulted in new shapes, as in an early etching of two beggars, where the hillock in the foreground has been added over lines etched earlier (fig. 22). Rembrandt could have chosen to remove the lines with a scraper and a burnishing iron, but he did not; he etched over them. There are plenty of traces of earlier images



20.
Rembrandt, *St Jerome Reading in an Italian Landscape*,
c. 1651-55, etching, burin and drypoint,
printed on Japanese paper, state I (2),
259 x 210 mm, Amsterdam,
The Rembrandt House Museum

in a number of Segers's prints. He left them—although he, too, had the opportunity to polish them out. The *Rocky Landscape with Ship's Rigging* is a prime example of this (fig. 10). Segers usually 'painted up' his prints by 'washing' them with paint. Rembrandt also tried this method, albeit only occasionally. One impression of his *Landscape with a Cow Drinking* in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam was printed on a sheet that had been prepared with greenish-grey paint, diluted with water (figs. 23 and 24).¹⁴ Using these techniques,

work and Rembrandt's. Segers etched with a painterly hand whereas Rembrandt's was very linear and graphic. The affinity between Rembrandt and Segers is therefore much more a question of the approach to the work: the ongoing search for new techniques and artistic possibilities, printing on different supports, the retention and use of old traces in the plate, working in different states and the individual treatment of each print to create unique works of art.

both artists were able to turn individual impressions from the same etching plate into unique works of art.

In 1916 the art historian Jaro Springer argued that, like *The Flight into Egypt*, Rembrandt's etching of *The Three Trees* (fig. 25) was the result of his reworking one of Segers's plates.¹⁵ This theory was given short shrift by art historians and print experts, although it is a fascinating notion. Springer's idea sprang from his recognition of Segers's interest in the contrast between mountains and plains. The effect of depth could be achieved with areas of light and shade, cross-hatching and tonality, and by constructing the landscape with this in mind. In his *Three Trees* Rembrandt also tackled these challenges. However the underlying line structure used to achieve tonality has little if anything in common with the techniques Segers used. Nonetheless Springer's idea is understandable and *The Three Trees* is not the only etched landscape by Rembrandt that calls Segers to mind. The way Segers made his buildings sink into the surrounding landscape seems to be echoed in Rembrandt's *View of Haarlem and Bloemendaal* (fig. 26).¹⁶

There are also obvious differences between Segers's



UNDER THE SPELL OF HERCULES SEGERS

THE MODERNS

Mireille Cornelis

At the beginning of the twentieth century, interest in printmaking as an art form in its own right increased dramatically among artists in Europe and the United States. In their search for new means and a new aesthetic to rekindle enthusiasm for the medium, many artists looked to their predecessors for inspiration. They found it in Rembrandt's etchings and in prints by artists like Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Francisco Goya, Rodolphe Bresdin and William Blake. Segers, rediscovered around 1900, likewise played a role in these changing attitudes towards the graphic medium and its future.¹

Some modern artists who saw Segers's work felt it was an event that completely changed their own art. A number of them experienced the encounter with Segers's etchings as a shock and at the same time as a form of self-recognition: '... sometimes from across the centuries you find someone who feels like a brother. In one illuminating instant you know that you are not alone.'² This was how film director Werner Herzog described his first confrontation with Segers's work. Interestingly, independently of one another, other artists experienced a similar sense of recognition.³ The writer, essayist and critic Hans Gomperts (1915-1998) analysed this unexpected and startling sensation of artistic kinship in a number of writers. He believed that the sense of shock was caused by seeming recognition when the viewer is simultaneously grabbed by something which is completely new: 'The old is recognizable because you own it; the new because it fits into an open space like a missing piece of a jigsaw.'⁴

For some artists, however, recognition in Segers's works seems to go far deeper; they look upon Segers as a kindred spirit. The question here is always how real or well-founded the implied relationship is. What is recognition, what is projection and what is misunderstanding? The fact that misunderstandings in art do not by definition have to have a negative outcome, but can even be stimulating and fruitful, was argued by Eddy de Jongh, citing numerous examples, in his Huizinga Lecture in 1992.⁵ We also find shocks of recognition and fruitful misunderstandings in the history of the reception of Segers's work. The yearning for recognition has led many modern artists to see Segers as a modern artist, too. As did Herzog, 'The most remarkable and really frightening thing about Segers is his modernity, his stimulating courage to take risks.'⁶

But does this also make Segers's work intrinsically modern? As Christopher Atkins argues in his *Signature Style of Frans Hals*, a study about the modernity of Frans Hals, 'modernity has not been projected onto Hals's rough manner,

but rather ... his style is deeply embedded within what has come to be the modern aesthetic and thus become inextricably modern.⁷ Perhaps the same applies to Segers's work: in later times people identified a visual vocabulary in his work that was perceived as modern and sparked imitation. Segers's short biography offers scope for an interpretation of the artist as a modern bohemian, rejected in his own day and only acknowledged as a genius after his unfortunate life and death. These kinds of ideas about the romance of being an artist find an echo in the interpretations of Segers's work and personality by artists and poets.

Technical Complexity: The Freedom of the Experiment

Various twentieth-century printmakers have researched Segers's complex techniques, looking particularly at the techniques he used in etchings like the *Larch* (fig. 6, p. 113) and *The Large Tree* (fig. 8, p. 17). The technical mystery concealed in these etchings was particularly attractive and challenging for artists. Their experiments subsequently encouraged them to come up with their own inventions and use the discoveries they made in their own work.

It was probably the German printmaker and theoretician Alexander Friedrich (1895-1968) who was the first to undertake systematic experiments in an endeavour to unravel Segers's 'alchemical' techniques.⁸ His graphic work and his publications, too, appear to have been forgotten, despite praise by his contemporaries.⁹ Friedrich's major publication, *Handlung und Gestalt des Kupferstiches und der Radierung* (1931), was dedicated to Segers. His accurate observations of Segers's etchings can be found in a manuscript that unfortunately was never published.¹⁰ Friedrich and Wilhelm Fraenger had intended to write a critical catalogue together, but only a few of their findings were included in Fraenger's 1922 book and his own book published in 1931.¹¹ Friedrich's own graphic oeuvre betrays his fascination with Segers even more. Three impressions from the same plate show similarities to Segers's work (figs. 48-50).¹² Friedrich's prints are also different from one another, in the quantity of ink and the use of different supports. He experimented with different kinds of paper—from the Far East, for instance, and thick black paper (figs. 51-53). In the last etching the idea of printing 'in negative' is also indebted to Segers and can be compared with his *Ruins of the Abbey of Rijnsburg* (fig. 9).¹³ Furthermore *The Summit* and *The Valley* seem to be almost direct homages to Segers, in technique as well as subject.



48.

Alexander Friedrich, *Der Gipfel* (The Summit), 1921, etching, printed in grey-green on pink paper, 240 x 198 mm, private collection



49.

Alexander Friedrich, *Der Gipfel* (The Summit), 1921, etching, printed in grey-green on pink paper, 240 x 198 mm, private collection

50.

Alexander Friedrich, *Der Gipfel* (The Summit), 1921, etching, printed in grey-green on pink paper, 240 x 198 mm, private collection, 240 x 198 mm, private collection

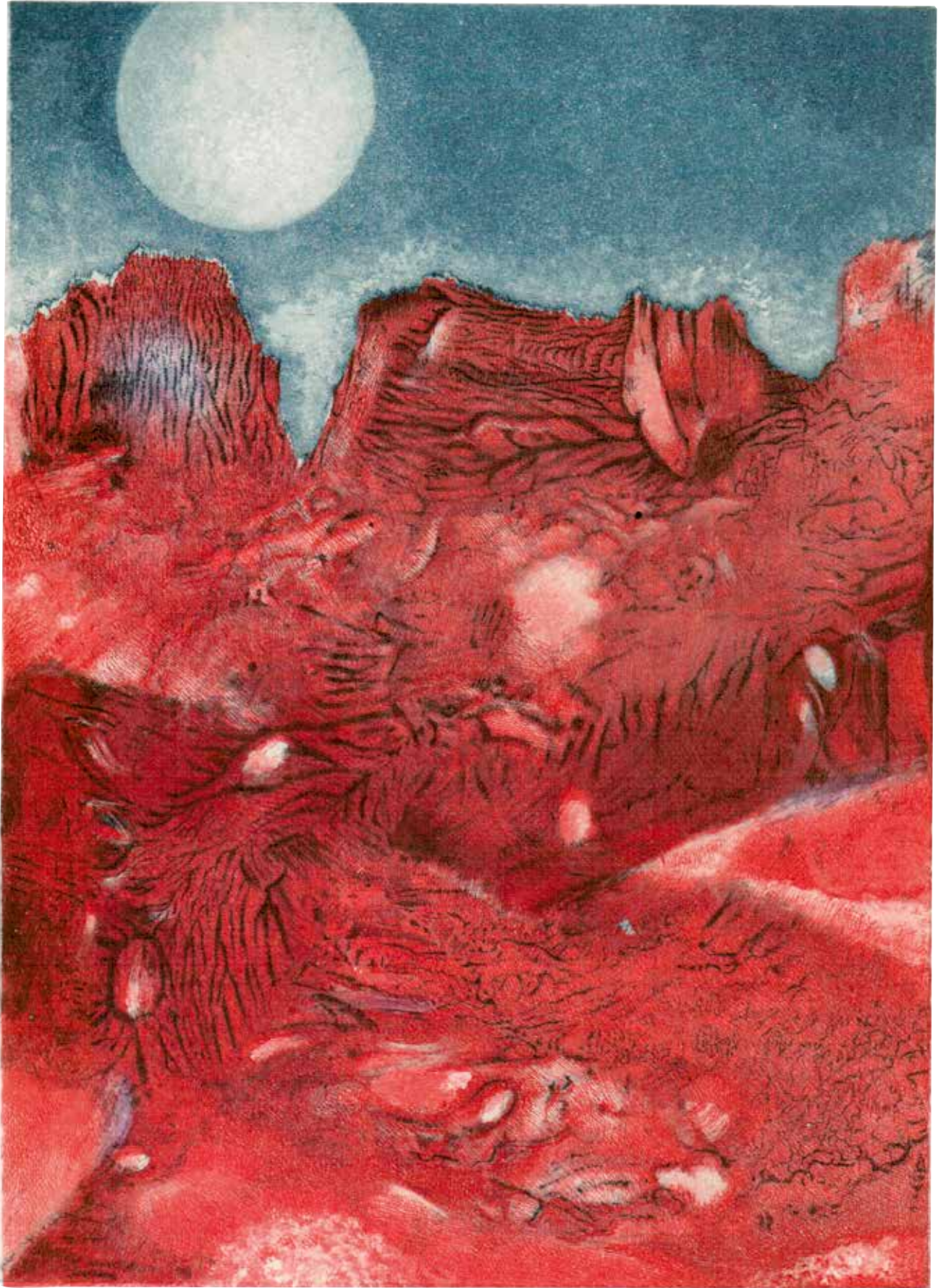
Her work has been compared to Segers's.⁴² These are not imitations, either of Segers or Hayter, but an echo of both sources of inspiration certainly resonates in her association with the material.

Segers's influence also seems to be perceptible in the surrealist landscapes and the *frottages* of Max Ernst (1891-1976). The parallels between Segers and Ernst were first remarked upon in 1960 by the art historian Heinz Spielmann.⁴³ He described how Ernst 'found' an image by means of his technique, an approach he thought he also recognized in Segers's work, as if the surfaces of the landscapes had printed themselves and left their material traces on a piece of paper. Jacques Houplain also wrote about Segers, suggesting that the rock formations 'were found', as it were, through the fusion of different techniques.⁴⁴ This calls to mind Leonardo da Vinci's notion of 'finding' motifs in spots and chance structures. This form of discovery certainly applied to Ernst. Around 1925 he developed a technique that proved of great importance to his own artistic development and influenced other artists, too. Leonardo's notes had reminded him of the lively ideas and fantasies he had as a child.⁴⁵ Ernst called the semi-automatic technique that he subsequently developed *frottage*.⁴⁶ He rubbed graphite over paper, laid on a piece of wood, for instance, and the chance textures this produced were then used as inspiration for further creations. These textures evoke associations with the natural world. The eye spontaneously creates a landscape, as for example on his painting *Grasshoppers' Song to the Moon* (fig. 69). Ernst transformed some of his paintings into etchings, where he made seemingly chance landscapes with enormous technical precision (fig. 70).⁴⁷ Spielmann actually called Segers the 'forerunner of Surrealism', because he thought that his work used a similar kind of pictorial vocabulary.⁴⁸ Indeed it could be said of Segers and Ernst that the visual language of the one was akin to that of the other (cf. fig. 69 with fig. 11).⁴⁹



69.

Max Ernst, *Sauterelles à la lune* (Grasshoppers' Song to the Moon), 1953, oil on canvas, 885 x 116 cm, Cologne, Ludwig Museum



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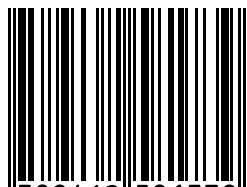
HERCULES SEGERS STICHTING

For centuries, driven by admiration and rivalry, artists have influenced one another. Rembrandt is regarded as one of the world's greatest artists, but even he sought inspiration in the work of others he admired. He was a great lover of the work of the eccentric Northern Netherlandish landscape painter and print-maker Hercules Segers (1589/90-1633/40). Segers is one of the most intriguing figures of the Golden Age. Rembrandt was fascinated by his paintings, and the experimental nature of Segers's prints certainly encouraged him in his own printmaking. He shared his fascination with Segers with his pupils and other artists in his circle of friends.

There was a revival of interest in Segers's work at the beginning of the twentieth century, and several printmakers used it as an example in their teaching. The eminent British printmaker Stanley William Hayter introduced Segers to artists in Paris and New York. There are contemporary artists, too, who see Segers as a unique source of inspiration. This subject has never before been addressed in a book. *Under the Spell of Hercules Segers: Rembrandt and the Moderns*, with beautifully illustrated essays by Mireille Cornelis, Eddy de Jongh and Leonore van Sloten, accompanies the exhibition of the same name in the Rembrandt House Museum.



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