

Australia Dossier by Noelene Isherwood

Extraordinary Rembrandt exhibit under way

The exhibition is thrilling half a million Australians, who rejected a boycott call by a pornographic modern artist.

Beginning on Oct. 1 and continuing through Feb. 15, 1998, the most superb exhibition of Rembrandt's works ever assembled in one location, is now on display. Melbourne and Canberra are the host cities for a collection of 30 autographed paintings, 40 paintings of the Rembrandt "school," and dozens of etchings and drawings gathered from 58 of the world's foremost galleries and private owners.

Dr. Timothy Potts, Director of the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) and Coordinating Curator of the exhibition in Australia, stated, "We are getting about one-tenth of all the surviving Rembrandt paintings. They cover the span of his career and all the major themes for which he is famous—biblical history, landscape, portraiture, and self-portraiture."

In addition, 13 of the world's most renowned Rembrandt experts, including Dr. Albert Blankert, the exhibit's Guest Curator, who is based in Holland, convened a two-day symposium to debate the issues of "Rembrandt attribution." As one art critic put it, "The current intense international scholastic debate about Rembrandt—about what is and what isn't a Rembrandt, and his influence on art—has never been more intense."

One of the most eloquent tributes to Rembrandt came from his contemporary, Constantijn Huygens, father of the mathematician and philosopher Christiaan Huygens. In 1630, Huygens visited the studio of the 23-year-old Rembrandt, and later remarked, "I want to say that Rembrandt's finest painting is one of the penitent Judas, returning the silver coins, the price of

the innocent Lord, to the high priest. This painting of Judas I would place on a par with whatever beauty has been created throughout the ages. I maintain that no one, be he Protogenes, Apelles, or Parthasius, ever conceived, or, were they to return to earth, ever could conceive what has been gathered in a single human figure and expressed in its totality by a beardless boy, a Dutchman, a miller's son. I say this in pure amazement. Rembrandt, I salute you!"

Rembrandt's mastery of light and shade, and his technical precision, make him a master craftsman, but it is his capacity to paint the "unpaintable" inner truths of the souls of his subjects—be they strengths, or weaknesses—which make him a true genius. This "painting between the brush-strokes," or, as the musical conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler termed it with respect to music, "singing between the notes," was particularly powerful in two of the paintings, "The Apostle Peter Kneeling" (on loan from a private collection in the U.S.A.) and "Monk Reading" (on loan from the Sinebrychoff Museum, Helsinki).

But, indicative of the prevailing cultural pessimism and the evil duplicity that reigns in the art world today, the NGV simultaneously sponsored a disgusting exhibition by the American photographer Andres Serrano, only a week after the opening of the Rembrandt exhibition.

This exhibition was eventually cancelled by Dr. Potts for security reasons, following the vandalizing of a sacrilegious photograph entitled "Piss Christ," which depicts a crucifix immersed in the artist's urine. The attack

that ruined that photograph was merely the finale in a series of earlier protests, including an appeal to the Supreme Court by the Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne, Dr. George Pell, through Her Majesty's Supreme Court, to try to ban the photograph. Also, an elderly man who was deeply offended, was arrested for trying to remove it from the gallery.

Serrano denounced the NGV and Dr. Potts, screaming, "I protest this spineless act by the NGV. I protest, I protest, I protest!" going so far as to call Dr. Potts a criminal. The satanic Serrano made an appeal to the Australian public to support his protest by boycotting the Rembrandt exhibition. Half a million visitors are expected to view the exhibition; as of Nov. 4, some 70,000 had ignored Serrano's "boycott" and treated themselves to a precious feast of unparalleled beauty.

Given his noted sense of humor, it is likely that Rembrandt, from his immortal resting place, is laughing insightfully at the attempted dirty trick. After Rembrandt's death in 1669, the art scholar Fillip Baldinucci wrote of his humor and his complete devotion to his work: "He was a first-rate joker and laughed at everyone. He dressed in tatty, dirty clothes in which he worked. When he was hard at work not even the foremost monarch on earth would have managed to be granted an audience."

Australia has often been accused of "having no culture." The British aristocracy which has dominated this country, has tried to keep it that way, whereby the average citizen believes his culture to be beer-swilling, corned beef and potatoes, and rugby. Today, Australia must search its soul to find those more noble qualities that will ensure the nation's continued existence through the present crisis. The public support for the Rembrandt exhibit, augurs well for that endeavor.