From the beginning of his career, Rembrandt advertised his ability to represent not just emotions but also more enduring inner states or character traits through expressive self-portraits. This essay argues that through laughter, an unusual expression in a self-portrait, Rembrandt claimed to be an impassioned representer of the passions. To this end, it examines some of his earliest painted and etched self-portraits, his Self-Portrait with Saskia of about 1636, in Dresden, and the late Self-Portrait, in Cologne, all of which feature Rembrandt’s laughing face. It concludes that Rembrandt’s laughter also displays his delight in his mastery of the emotions. DOI: 10.18277/makf.2015.06

Rembrandt’s early supporters and critics lauded him for his naturalistic rendering of the emotions, which they called the affecten (passions or motions of the mind). In 1718, in the first extensive biography of Rembrandt, Arnold Houbraken criticized Rembrandt as a breaker of rules, both artistic and social, yet the only work of art that Houbraken chose to reproduce in his entire three-volume book of biographies was a drawing of the Supper at Emmaus (fig. 1) that revealed Rembrandt’s “close observation of the various emotions.” Rembrandt’s former pupil Samuel van Hoogstraten, writing in 1672, characterized Rembrandt as a master at representing the “movements of the soul.” Even before Rembrandt had left Leiden, his earliest champion, Constantijn Huygens, secretary to Stadtholder Frederik Hendrik, had predicted that Rembrandt would be unsurpassed in rendering emotions. Further, in the only words of substance that he is known to have written about his art, in a letter of 1639 to Huygens, Rembrandt justified his slow production (on the Passion Series for Frederik Hendrik) with the claim that he was putting “die meeste ende die naetuereelste beweechgelickheit” into his work: “in these two pictures the deepest and most lifelike emotion has been observed [and rendered]. That is also the main reason why they have been so long in my hands.”

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Figure 1. Arnold Houbraken, after Rembrandt, Supper at Emmaus, from Arnold Houbraken, De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen (Amsterdam: Arnold Houbraken, 1718–21), etching, engraving, and roulette, 16.1 x 13.3 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. RP-P-1879-A-1000 (artwork in the public domain)

From the beginning of his career, Rembrandt advertised his ability to represent not just emotions but also more enduring inner states or character traits through expressive self-portraits. Many of his earliest painted and etched self-portraits show him engaged in the challenge of evoking his psychological presence and makeup, of portraying the “inward motions” of his mind. Rendered with a distinctive spontaneity and unidealized naturalness, these unusually casual images show the young Rembrandt both developing a stylistic vocabulary for representing a continuum
of inward states and emotions and also putting himself forward as an artist who was impassioned and gifted with a capacity to represent—and presumably to feel—the very same emotions and states of mind.

In two of these early self-portraits—Rembrandt Laughing of circa 1628 (fig. 2), recently acquired by the J. Paul Getty Museum, and the etching Self-Portrait in a Cap, Laughing of 1630 (fig. 3)—Rembrandt shows himself laughing. Self-Portrait with Saskia of about 1636 (see fig. 11), in Dresden, and the late Self-Portrait (see fig. 12), in Cologne, likewise feature Rembrandt’s laughing face. Although these later paintings differ greatly from the earliest self-portraits, they merit consideration as a group and in relation to Rembrandt’s capacity to represent emotions, specifically emotions conveyed through laughter, for laughter is an unusual expression in a self-portrait.5

The most famous reference, in Rembrandt’s time and ours, to laughter as it pertains to representing the emotions stems from Horace’s Ars Poetica (circa 10–8 BCE), a text that the young Rembrandt likely knew, if not from his Latin school days, then from the discourse of artists’ studios. Advising the tragic actor, Horace wrote, “As human faces laugh with those who are laughing, so they weep with those who are weeping. If you wish me to cry, you must first feel grief yourself.”6 A similar empathic sentiment is conveyed in Paul’s Epistle to the Romans 12:15: “Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep.” In the fifteenth century Alberti, drawing on Horace, advised the painter:

A historia will move spectators when the men painted in the picture outwardly demonstrate their own feelings as clearly as possible. Nature provides . . . that we mourn with the mourners, laugh with those who laugh, and grieve with the grief-stricken. Yet these feelings are known from movements of the body. . . . when we are happy and gay, our movements are free and pleasing in their inflexions.7

Rembrandt’s facial expression would have had a twofold impact on the viewer. On the one hand, it would have prompted the viewer to laugh or smile and to feel the pleasure expressed in Rembrandt’s laughing face. Further, it characterized Rembrandt as joyous and impassioned, as having a poetische gheest (poetic spirit) or imagination. Karel van Mander explained the emotion that laughter expressed when he wrote that to depict “gaiety or gladness of the heart . . . make the eyes half closed, the mouth somewhat open and merrily laughing.” This “gladness of the heart,” which he also called “pure amorousness,” was closely related to love and desire, and all were conveyed pictorially through laughter.8 Rembrandt had many reasons to be content. But in his primary and public identity as an artist, he would have taken pleasure in his art. Laughter was Rembrandt’s way of saying that he was impassioned with and driven by his desire for, or love of, art.

The idea that love gives birth to art, liefde baart kunst in the Dutch topos, goes back to classical antiquity. In six-
teenth-century art theory it was melded with a Christianized notion of love as the highest virtue. Drawing on Seneca, art theorists of Rembrandt’s time ranked painters according to what motivated them: the lowest worked only for money; the middle ranking sought fame; and the most virtuous were driven not by self-interest but by love, meaning love of art. Samuel van Hoogstraten represented this triad on the exterior of his London Perspective Box. Franciscus Junius cast love of art as akin to Neoplatonic poetic furor when he described the painter as “possessed with the love of [Art] . . . (with) a blind fit of most violent and irresistible fury,” which causes him to “expresse in his workes the inward motions of his most forward minde.” Through joyous laughter Rembrandt conveys that he ranks among the painters driven by love, the gifted few with the talent and burning desire to do something that has not been accomplished before.

Rembrandt Laughing was long thought to be lost, although it was known through an engraving (fig. 4) by Lambertus Antonius Claessens (1763–1834). Small, loosely painted on copper, and datable to circa 1628 on the basis of its monogram “RHL,” it shows Rembrandt in near half-length, with his arm akimbo and his head thrown back, laughing. The result is a wonderfully self-confident spontaneity, in handling and affect, that distinguishes it from Rembrandt’s other early paintings of himself. As in the Self-Portrait in Indianapolis (fig. 5) and in Jan Lievens’s Portrait of Rembrandt (fig. 6), Rembrandt wears a shiny gorget that alludes to his professional identity. The sheen of metal, notoriously difficult to render, had come to stand for the challenge of reflexikonst, of convincingly representing nature’s reflections in oil-based paint. The gorget also relates to the martial imagery that alludes to artistic rivalry and the painter’s fortitude in battling his adversaries. In the newly independent Dutch Republic, armor and shields—in Dutch schild, then thought to be the root of schilder, painter—were taking on patriotic meaning for artists seeking recognition for Netherlandish painting. Rembrandt’s expression—the laughing mouth and turn of the head—signals his joyous enthusiasm for the battle of the brush.

Traditionally, self-portraits had favored likenesses in a general state of composure; representing oneself as expressive, or by nature thoughtful, was a wholly different project. Laughter was especially unconventional. Perhaps it is for this reason that the Rembrandt Research Project does not recognize the Getty painting as a self-portrait. The rationale is that it, like Rembrandt’s other early informal self-images, is an expression study, a studio exercise in which Rembrandt used “his own face to solve certain artistic problems.” They may well be expression studies, but they are primarily images that Rembrandt used to fashion himself, characterize his art, and spread his fame. Their informality, unconventionality, and directness speak to the authenticity of Rembrandt’s gift for representing emotions and states of mind. It was in these initial presentations of himself that Rembrandt first claimed to be an impassioned representative of the passions.

The complex process of self-representation involves, at once (and to varying degrees), inner-directed self-scrutiny and outer-directed self-construction. By Rembrandt’s time, self-portrayal was a fully developed, multifaceted concept.
It had become associated with the idea, embodied in the topos “every painter paints himself,” that the artistic genius puts something ineffable of himself into his art.\(^{16}\) Indeed, self-portraits were held in such high regard that I wonder if it would have even been possible for Rembrandt to portray himself, however informally, without thinking of it as a self-portrait. After all, literary memoir—the emerging product of privacy and the study—was also in vogue. A comparably acute self-awareness is evident in Constantijn Huygens, who wrote his autobiography between 1629 and 1631,\(^{17}\) just when he was securing paintings by Rembrandt for the stadtholder, and just when Rembrandt was engaged in his first intense production of self-portraits.

Huygens recognized that Rembrandt was extraordinarily talented and unusually motivated. The route Rembrandt pursued initially was the most ambitious: history painting, which concerned the weightiest human subject matter and presented the greatest artistic challenges. According to Van Mander, the “passions of the soul” were the foundation of “history painting.”\(^ {18} \) The goal Rembrandt set himself at the outset was to master representing the expressive person; he worked at developing pictorial means both to represent the momentary gestures and facial expressions of dramatic narratives and to evoke lasting, profound inner states that reveal themselves in subtle external traces. It is likely that Huygens encouraged Rembrandt’s representation of emotions. In his oft-quoted encomium of *Judas Returning the Thirty Pieces of Silver*, of circa 1629 (private collection), Huygens praised Rembrandt as having an astonishing talent for expressing “the passions of the soul” with a new, convincing truthfulness, which he achieved by observing nature (and human nature) rather than classical models. In praising Rembrandt as surpassing Lievens in the “liveliness of the passions,” Huygens set Rembrandt up as excelling in the most difficult part of art. In characterizing Rembrandt as one who “gives himself wholly over to dealing with what he wants to express from within himself,” Huygens marked Rembrandt as a master of the emotions, who was himself impassioned and driven by his love of art.\(^ {19}\)

Rembrandt’s promotion of himself as painter of the passions played out in the shadow of Huygens and in the most appropriate of biblical subjects. In the first two paintings from the *Passion Series*, which Huygens procured for Frederik Hendrik, Rembrandt assumed contrasting expressive roles. In the *Raising of the Cross* he boldly represents himself as one of Christ’s cold-blooded, emotionally detached executioners: in a guise that accords with a well-defined convention of Calvinist confessional expression, Rembrandt’s self-implication proclaims not personal guilt but humanity’s responsibility for Christ’s suffering. His lack of affect differs from his anguished, sorrowful face in the *Descent from the Cross*, where he cast himself as a compassionate bearer of the limp, broken Christ.\(^ {20}\)

The *Passion Series* appears to have resulted from a competition that took place in 1630–31. Remarkably similar paintings of *Christ on the Cross*—Rembrandt’s (fig. 7) is in Le Mas d’Agenais, Lievens’s in Nancy—suggest that Huygens asked the two young Leideners to compete for the commission by making paintings based on a *Christ on the Cross* by Peter Paul Rubens, which they would have known through an engraving. Huygens must have judged Rembrandt’s anguished, suffering Christ to be the more moving of the two.

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**Figure 7.** Rembrandt, *Christ on the Cross*, 1631, oil on canvas mounted on wood, 92.9 x 72.6 cm. Le Mas d’Agenais, Collegiate Church of Saint Vincent (artwork in the public domain)
Similarities between the expression on Christ's face in *Christ on the Cross*, which is dated 1631, and on Rembrandt's face in his etched *Self-Portrait, Open-Mouthed, as if Shouting* (fig. 8) provide insight into Rembrandt's method for representing emotions with convincing sincerity. In the etching, he shows himself crying out in distress, his mouth snarling in pain, his forehead deeply creased. It appears that Rembrandt has imagined, and acted out before a mirror, the same anguished expression that he then used on the face of Christ. The *Self-Portrait, Open-Mouthed* is one of several small etchings of himself making faces that Rembrandt created in 1630. His expression of astonished wonder in the *Self-Portrait, Wide-Eyed* (fig. 9) is much like that on the face of an amazed bystander in his etched *Raising of Lazarus*. His *Self-Portrait, Frowning* (fig. 10) conveys anger through his flattened brow, fierce glare, and leonine hair. For the *Self-Portrait in a Cap, Laughing* (see fig. 3), he glances over his shoulder to capture his toothy grin and eyes half-closed in pleasure.

It has been suggested that Rembrandt made these etchings as studio exercises. However, these were prints, pulled in multiple impressions and intended for distribution to viewers other than himself. One way to understand these etchings is to see the young artist engaged in—and advertising himself as engaged in—a kind of seventeenth-century method acting, imagining his feelings in the mirror. In this he would have been following Horace's advice to the tragic actor. Rembrandt's contemporaries would likely have understood it in this way.

Indeed, in looking at himself in the mirror, Rembrandt may have been following Van Mander's advice to represent emotions based on experience and empirical observation. Van Mander provided a specific formula for representing gaiety or gladness of the heart, the emotion that Rembrandt demonstrates in the *Rembrandt Laughing* and the slightly later etching: "make the eyes half closed, the mouth somewhat open and merrily laughing." Otherwise Van Mander offered only general observations on the expressive roles of different facial features; he declined to describe specific emotions because, he maintained, artists best learn from nature how to represent feelings and states of mind. Franciscus Junius took a similarly naturalistic, experience-based approach to the passions: the artist, he wrote, "must be well acquainted . . . principally with the nature of man. . . . It sufficeth that he doe but learne by a daily observation [of] how several passions and affections of the minde doe alter the countenance of man." According to Junius, for proper invention, "our minde must first of all be moved, . . . our minde must in a manner bee transformed unto the nature of the conceived things." Only an artist who is so moved can hope to move the spectator with his work.

Samuel van Hoogstraten, too, says that only the artist with a poetic spirit has the ability to imagine the passions in a way that will truly move the beholder. In the , Van Hoogstraten quotes Horace to illustrate that a picture "must have in it a certain moving quality [beweglijkheid] that has power over those who see it . . . 'One smiles, or weeps, the viewer follows the trail: so if you want me to cry, you must cry first.'" Presumably reflecting what he had learned in Rembrandt's studio, Van Hoogstraten recommends acting out emotions and studying them on one's own face: "If one wants to gain honor in this most noble part of art [the passions], one must reform oneself totally into an actor."
goes on to say, "the same benefit can be derived from the depiction of your own passions, at best in front of a mirror, where you are simultaneously the performer and the beholder. But here a poetic spirit [poëtische geest] is necessary in order to imagine oneself in another's place."  

If Rembrandt's admirers valued his history paintings for the way they explored states of mind, presumably they could also see in his self-portraits evidence of his ability to plumb the depths of his own mind. The point of the Dutch appropriation of the Horatian dictum was that the painter, through his imagination, or poëtische geest, had the capacity to feel and hence represent with sincerity the emotions and mental states of his subjects. The self-portrait—not in guise, but as oneself—shifted this authenticity of emotional and intellectual presence to the likeness of the painter and, by implication, to the painter himself.  

Although Rembrandt typically suggested inwardness, thoughtfulness, and even melancholy in his self-portraits, after his early self-portraits, he did not represent himself as actively or momentarily emotional, with two exceptions in which he shows himself laughing: the Self-Portrait with Saskia of the mid-1630s (fig. 11) and the Self-Portrait (fig. 12) of the early 1660s. Aside from Rembrandt's laughing face, what these two have in common is that, in each, Rembrandt portrayed himself in a guise—to an extent they are portraits historié. And, in each, Rembrandt revised the original composition in ways that downplay the narrative, call into question the initial guise, and make the self-portrait more about Rembrandt.  

In the Self-Portrait with Saskia, painted in the mid-1630s, at the height of his success as a portraitist, Rembrandt portrayed himself in elaborate quasihistorical dress, in a tavern, toasting us with a tall glass of beer, and with his wife sitting on his lap. His guise is now usually understood as that of the Prodigal Son or as a secularized, modern-day prodigal. The setting is recognized to be a tavern on the basis of a partially visible tally board, hanging on the wall at left; a peacock pie, a luxury signifying worldliness; and the presence of a woman playing a lute who, though no longer visible, originally stood between Rembrandt and Saskia (X-rays reveal that Rembrandt painted over this figure). Together, guise and setting would seem to cast Saskia as a whore. A precedent for the artist in the guise of the Prodigal Son is found in Van Mander's report that Albrecht Dürer represented himself as the Prodigal Son feeding with the swine in his engraving of 1498. Later artists who cast themselves as prodigals include Gabriel Metsu, whose Portrait of the Artist with His Wife Isabella de Wolff in a Tavern (fig. 13) of 1661 comes closest to Rembrandt's painting (although Metsu appears to sit on his wife's lap!), Jan Steen, and probably Vermeer, if the figure at left in the Procuress is actually Vermeer's only self-portrait. (It is quite a coincidence that the paintings by Metsu and Vermeer are in the Dresden Gemäldegalerie, along with the Self-Portrait with Saskia.)  

Whereas early critics interpreted the picture as a realistic portrayal of the couple's happiness and prosperity shortly after their marriage in 1634, the historians of the present exhibition have concluded that Rembrandt painted this self-portrait in order to cast himself as the Prodigal Son, gorging himself on the world, and Saskia as the whore that he is about to consume.
after their marriage in 1634, early-twentieth-century critics found the notion of Rembrandt's pleasure in his own prosperity distasteful and incompatible with their vision of him as an independent, rebellious artist-genius. To them, the picture mocked proper burgerlijk values; if Rembrandt lived luxuriously, it was in defiance of Dutch middle-class austerity. Once the scene was identified as an episode from the parable of the Prodigal Son, however, understanding of it took on a moralizing tone. As a narrative of prodigality, it was interpreted (somewhat scornfully) in a personal mode as Rembrandt's and Saskia's flaunting of their newly found wealth in the face of relatives who had accused them of squandering her inheritance. More recently, it has been seen more positively, as a Protestant confessional in which Rembrandt cast himself as a kind of Everyman Prodigal Son. Interpreters of the painting have been preoccupied with the question as to whether, in the absence of firm markers of the biblical pictorial tradition, any reference to the Prodigal Son would even have been recognized.

What if we dispense with the narrative and the moralizing and see Self-Portrait with Saskia more straightforwardly as an image of gaiety, delight, and celebration on Rembrandt's part? This is, after all, a large painting that Rembrandt probably made for himself, to hang in his home, as is suggested by the inclusion of a “conterfeytel van Rembrant van Rijn en sijn huysvrouwe” in the 1677 inventory of the estate of the widow of the man who had been appointed guardian of Rembrandt's son Titus after Rembrandt's insolvency. Then we might take his enthusiasm to be for his wife Saskia, not as whore but as model and muse (replacing the usual prostitute-cum-model with a sterner, more inspiring presence); for his poetische gheest, his creativity and talent for imagining histories (that is helped along by Bacchus); and for his success as a painter, a painter whose joyous laughter affirms his delight in his success at and passion for his art.

During the last decade of his life, Rembrandt again represented himself laughing, with his brow raised and looking directly at the viewer, in the roughly painted Self-Portrait in Cologne (see fig. 12). Of the many explanations of his laughter that have been put forward, the most likely is that he represented himself in the guise of Zeuxis, at least initially. Zeuxis was famed for his additive creation of ideal beauty (to paint Helen of Troy he gathered the six most beautiful women in town and represented the most beautiful body parts of each) and for his deceptive, illusionistic realism (he painted grapes that looked so real that birds tried to eat them). But Rembrandt was interested in neither beauty that was more perfect than Nature nor eye-fooling illusionistic naturalism. Zeuxis was also known for his death: as Pliny tells it, Zeuxis was painting a portrait of a woman who was so ugly that he laughed himself to death. X-rays tell us that Rembrandt's Self-Portrait originally looked more like a painting by his pupil Aert de Gelder (fig. 14), in that Rembrandt was originally holding a brush, obviously painting a portrait and laughing. By this point in his life, Rembrandt was renowned for his ugly nudes. Perhaps he was having a laugh in the face of his critics and death. Yet Rembrandt may have rethought this, as he painted out his hand and brush, although he kept his mahlstick.

Finally, and most importantly, Zeuxis was renowned for his skill at representing the emotions. Karel van Mander lauded Zeuxis as unsurpassed in this regard, as did Samuel van Hoogstraten. Rembrandt in the guise of Zeuxis as master of the emotions seems reasonable. Although he laughs, perhaps there is not enough here to take him as identifying with the Zeuxis who laughed in the face of ugliness, even if Aert de Gelder—whose time in Rembrandt's
studio in the early 1660s may have coincided with the making of the Cologne Self-Portrait in about 1662—seems to have understood it in just that way. As in Self-Portrait with Saskia, where the identification with the Prodigal is only tenuous, in the Cologne Self-Portrait Rembrandt has eliminated identifying features, perhaps because he changed his mind about identifying with the historical figure. To borrow a phrase from Alison Kettering, “by emptying his painting[s] of standard content,” Rembrandt has left room for us to interpret it and, here, to read it on the basis of his face. What if we take Rembrandt—and Rembrandt's face—at his word, as an elderly painter with a knowing but sincere smile, a smile that expresses his satisfaction with a long career of loving devotion to his work?

In Rembrandt's time, the emotionally expressive face—and especially the laughing face—typically belonged in a narrative, whether of the historical or genre sort. Yet from the outset Rembrandt both detached expressive faces from narrative contexts and made them his own face. In the Getty Rembrandt Laughing and the expressive etchings of 1630 he created independent, self-standing works of his own expressive face to proclaim his ability to feel and represent emotions. As much as critics have wanted to reattach seemingly lost biblical meaning to some of Rembrandt's later paintings—the Jewish Bride as Isaac and Rebecca, Hendrickje Bathing as Susanna with[ou]t the Elders—it may be that Rembrandt was aiming for precisely that lack of, or ambiguity of, historical reference. For a painter raised in and dedicated to history painting, emptying his works of standard content must have been a difficult and liberating accomplishment. The Self-Portrait with Saskia and the Cologne Self-Portrait become meaningful as self-portraits precisely because the narrative and historical identification have been so pushed to the background. They have become sincere and affecting self-images about Rembrandt and his pleasure in and profound love for his art. Through laughter Rembrandt displays his mastery of the emotions and his delight in that mastery.

*I started working on Rembrandt and self-portraits as an undergraduate at Swarthmore studying with Alison. This essay draws on my earlier published work on Rembrandt's self-portraits, cited below, and on a lecture about the Getty's Rembrandt Laughing that I delivered at the Kimbell Museum in Fort Worth.

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