

## BEYOND MATTHEW 19: THE WOMAN AT CHRIST'S FEET IN REMBRANDT'S *HUNDRED GUILDER PRINT*

Paul Crenshaw

This study proposes that our understanding of Rembrandt's *Hundred Guilder Print* has been limited by seeing it exclusively as illustrating the narrative vignettes related in the gospel passage of Matthew 19. Rather than being inspired only by this single textual source—as undeniably rich as it is—Rembrandt drew broadly on other representations, both biblical and nonscriptural, as visual inspiration for various figures and the overall compositional devices in the print. In particular, the reclining figure reaching up to touch the hem of Christ's cloak is identified as the woman with the issue of blood, found elsewhere in the gospel passages. As a small portion of a larger study, the identification serves to point to a wider understanding of the print as a path to salvation through faith, and a mode of art production and viewing that is associative rather than merely illustrative. DOI: [10.18277/makf.2015.04](https://doi.org/10.18277/makf.2015.04)

The persistence of the nickname of Rembrandt's *Hundred Guilder Print* is remarkable. In large part this is due to the “shock factor” of a high price tag, and even though in the absence of comparative prices or costs of living, the worth of a hundred guilders in Rembrandt's time is relatively unclear to most people today, it nonetheless seems like a lot of money. Thus the price/title bond acts as a powerful carrier of value. Unfortunately, it is not a designation that promotes any discernment or understanding of the events depicted in the scene, as is traditionally expected of most titles of works of art. When the print is given a more formal title in the modern contexts of museum exhibitions and scholarly publications, it is often called *Christ Preaching* or *Christ Healing the Sick*, or some close variant. This type of abbreviated title seems to have been common from the beginning of the print's renown. The conundrum of articulating the subject in the context of the incredible price was apparent already in the first written mention of the print, a letter dated June 9, 1654, from Joannes Myssens, a print dealer in Antwerp, to Karel van den Bosch, the bishop of Bruges. Myssens informed his client of the availability of “the rarest of prints produced by Rembrandt showing Christ healing the lepers,” before going on to indicate how much it was selling for in Amsterdam.<sup>1</sup>

While titles that emphasize either the preaching or the healing have the advantage of being succinct, just about every modern mention of the print invariably exposes the inadequacy of such a label, because there is so much more going on. Scholars have long known that the depicted scene takes its cues from chapter 19 of the Gospel according to Matthew. In fact, this textual source was clearly recognized by Rembrandt's contemporary Hendrick F. Waterloos in a poem, which is inscribed beneath an impression in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris (fig. 1). The first two quatrains of Waterloos's poem demonstrate that Rembrandt illustrated several passages directly from Matthew 19, including details such as the healing of the sick, the blessing of the children, the young man who goes away sorrowful because he cannot follow Christ's command to give away all that he owns, and the debates with the Pharisees.<sup>2</sup>



Figure 1. Rembrandt, *The Hundred Guilder Print*, ca. 1648, etching. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale (artwork in the public domain)

However, this overriding emphasis on Matthew 19 has had the effect of circumscribing scholarly interpretation and understanding of the print.<sup>3</sup> It has largely been interpreted as a combinative illustration of various vignettes told within this one gospel chapter. This study begins to expand that overly simple illustrative model in an effort to suggest multiple forms of inspiration on Rembrandt's part, and to demonstrate that the production of the print presupposed a collecting milieu capable of a sophisticated form of viewing that is based on the principle of forming associations rather than passively accepting seemingly direct connections. Among many examples of sources for Rembrandt that emerged from beyond Matthew 19, one figure in particular, the reclining woman at Christ's feet, will be identified as the woman with the issue of blood who touched Christ's cloak and was subsequently healed. Recognizing her in this way points toward the larger theme of salvation through faith that is inherent in Matthew 19 but has heretofore not been fully examined.

The expansiveness of the subject matter in *The Hundred Guilder Print* is easily demonstrated on a broad scale by looking at Rembrandt's visual sources. While the opening two lines of Matthew 19 relate that crowds followed Christ into Judea and he healed them there, the text clearly lacks enough specificity to have led Rembrandt to the variety of people that he shows seeking Christ's aid. In many instances Rembrandt looked beyond biblical references altogether to the tradition of beggar imagery. For example, the person being carried in a wheelbarrow in a print by the Housebook Master (fig. 2) or the couple supporting each other in Cornelis Massys's *Lame Beggar Leading a Woman with a Cane to the Right* (fig. 3), both resemble figures in the crowd in the right half of Rembrandt's print. Rembrandt could also have looked to beggars within biblical subject matter. The man with paralyzed legs in Albrecht Dürer's *Peter and John at the Gate* (fig. 4) bears a resemblance to a foreground figure in *The Hundred Guilder Print*, to cite just one example. It is not necessary to find one-to-one correspondences, per se, because such scenes are ubiquitous in the visual tradition.



Figure 2. The Housebook Master, *A Beggar Carrying His Wife in a Wheelbarrow*, engraving. London, The Warburg Institute (artwork in the public domain)



Figure 3. Cornelis Massys, *Lame Beggar Leading a Woman with a Cane to the Right*, engraving. Munich, Staatliche Graphische Sammlung (artwork in the public domain).



Figure 4. Albrecht Dürer, *Peter and John at the Gate*, 1513, engraving. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts (artwork in the public domain)

When one begins looking for poses and costumes similar to those of the cluster of women closest to Christ, it is clear that Rembrandt was looking at printed images of various subjects of Christ healing, where one sees over and over again women in turbans, kneeling in prayer at his feet. For example, the supplicant woman in *Christ Healing the Daughter of Jarius* (fig. 5), an engraving by Nicolas Beatrizet, after Girolamo Muziano, is quite similar in pose and placement to the kneeling, praying woman in the center foreground of Rembrandt's print. Moreover, images of Christ and the apostles performing miracles of healing provide precedents for several aspects of Rembrandt's print that, seen in isolation, have always seemed so original. Christ offering a multivalent gesture and the combination of multiple scenes into one can be found in *Christ Healing Various Sick Persons* by an anonymous German woodcutter of the late fifteenth century (fig. 6), and Rembrandt's central positioning of the figures and the overall balance of the composition, again with multiple narrative moments woven seamlessly into a single vignette, can be seen in Philips Galle's engraving after Maerten van Heemskerck, *The Apostles Healing the Sick and Driving Out Unclean Spirits* (fig. 7). The most direct precedent for Rembrandt's balanced composition, with its transition of light and shadow, and the overarching theme of health and sickness in a large-format horizontal print was surely Marcantonio Raimondi's engraving after Raphael known as *The Plague* (fig. 8).



Figure 5. Nicolas Beatrizet, after Girolamo Muziano, *Christ Healing the Daughter of Jarius*, ca. 1587, engraving. Leiden, Museum de Lakenhal (artwork in the public domain)



Figure 6. Anonymous (German), *Christ Healing Various Sick Persons*, 15th century (modern impression from 15th-century wood block). Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett (artwork in the public domain)



Figure 7. Philips Galle, after Maerten van Heemskerck, *The Apostles Healing the Sick and Driving Out Unclean Spirits*, engraving. Vienna, Albertina (artwork in the public domain)



Figure 8. Marcantonio Raimondi, after Raphael, *The Plague*, engraving. Vienna, Albertina (artwork in the public domain)

We have a record that, on at least one occasion, Rembrandt exchanged an impression of *The Hundred Guilder Print* for an impression of Raphael's masterpiece. This is evidenced by the inscription by Jan Pietersz Zomer, on the verso of an impression in the Amsterdam Rijksprentencabinet, in which he acknowledged a trade of these two prints and called Rembrandt "mijn speciale vriendt (my special friend)." As I have pointed out elsewhere, this was a thoughtful exchange, and even though it must have happened at a later point in Rembrandt's life, it surely points to *The Plague* as part of Rembrandt's inspiration in making his etching, since the two works are so closely related thematically and compositionally. The centrally placed principal figure of Terminus in *The Plague* matches the placement of Christ in *The Hundred Guilder Print* as a transitional marker from one life to another, pointing to a theme of judgment that is prompted by, but ultimately moves beyond, Matthew 19. Whereas Raphael depicted an ancient plague, Rembrandt depicted Christian healing and—I suggest—Christian salvation.<sup>4</sup>

One figure in particular in Rembrandt's print points to Marcantonio's print as a visual source and a theme of faith-healing and salvation that is not directly related to Matthew 19: the reclining woman at Christ's feet who reaches her right hand up toward him (fig. 9). A similar recumbent figure rests in the lower right of *The Plague*, but her placement and function in Rembrandt's print is markedly different. To my knowledge no art historian has ever before noted the manner in which the woman in Rembrandt's scene reaches up just so, in order to touch the tip of her finger to the hem of Christ's cloak.<sup>5</sup> This is not merely a compositional device, but a gesture that points to the theme of Christ as a healer through faith and indeed identifies this woman in a particular way: she is the woman with the issue of blood.



Figure 9. Rembrandt, *The Hundred Guilder Print*, ca. 1648, etching (detail). Amsterdam, Rijksprentencabinet (artwork in the public domain)

There are many people in the gospels who are healed through faith, and some episodes, while not depicting the woman with the issue of blood, were represented in a manner that comes very close to Rembrandt's depiction of this woman. Johan I Sadeler engraved a composition after a drawing by Marten de Vos depicting the healing of the paralytic at Capernaum (Matthew 9:1–8, Mark 2:1–12, and Luke 5:17–26), with an old man on a bier being lowered from the roof into Christ's presence (fig. 10). He does not reach up to Christ, but rather Christ points down to touch the incapacitated man, declaring after seeing the faith of his companions that the man's sins are forgiven. The woman in Rembrandt's print is differentiated from depictions of other healing miracles by her astounding gesture of touching Christ. It is not the same as the intimacy of embracing him or washing his feet, as one might see in imagery of the Virgin Mary, the Magdalen, or even Christ in the house of Mary and Martha. This is a stranger in a crowd who dares to touch his cloak.



Figure 10. Johan I Sadeler, after Marten de Vos, *The Healing of the Paralytic at Capernaum*, ca. 1587, engraving. Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst (artwork in the public domain)

The story of the woman with the issue of blood is found in Matthew 9:18–26, Mark 5:21–43, and Luke 8:40–56. On the road to the house of Jarius, where Christ would also perform a miracle (see above, fig. 5), a woman who had suffered twelve years with an issue of blood heard about Jesus, then came up to him from behind and touched his cloak. “If I may touch but his garment,” she said, “I shall be whole.” Christ felt a power leave him as the woman was healed, though at first he did not know who had touched him. When the woman fell at his feet and confessed, Christ said to her “Daughter, thy faith hath made thee whole.” The episode has a rich theological tradition. It has usually been the interpretation that the woman’s problem was related to menstruation, in Jewish law a state of uncleanness. The fact that she had boldly touched Christ, yet he not only forgave her but also healed her was a primary justification for allowing women into Christian churches even during times of menstruation. This contrasted starkly with Jewish dictates that saw menstruating women as impure, their blood competing with the holy blood of animal sacrifice, and barred them from entering the sacred region of the Temple in Jerusalem. Despite some tensions, authorities usually confirmed that Christian women were allowed not only to enter the church but also to continue to take the Eucharist during their periods, with no competition recognized between their blood and the sacrificial blood of Christ.<sup>6</sup> Thus the subject entered the visual tradition very early in the Christian era, as seen in a sarcophagus from the Vatican Necropolis (fig. 11).



Figure 11. Anonymous (early Christian), *Sarcophagus, detail of The Woman with the Issue of Blood*, ca. 5th century CE. The Vatican, Museo Pio Cristiano (artwork in the public domain)

Significantly, the woman in Rembrandt's representation is not identified by her blood issue, which would have been not only difficult to represent (especially if it was menstrual blood) but also potentially confusing in relation to the iconography of Christ's blood and its central Eucharistic importance. Throughout the visual tradition up to the early modern period, the episode of the woman with the issue of blood is almost invariably "cleaned up" in the same way. Never was she identified by any indication of blood, but rather by her act of kneeling down and touching Christ's cloak, as in Hans Sebald Beham's *Christ Healing the Woman with the Issue of Blood* (fig. 12).



Figure 12. Sebald Beham, *Christ Healing the Woman with the Issue of Blood*, 1530, woodcut. London, British Museum (artwork in the public domain)

Rembrandt, contrary to the entire prior visual tradition, actually did attempt to identify her by the issuance of blood, at least initially. Many preparatory drawings are known for *The Hundred Guilder Print*, and three include or focus exclusively on this figure (Benesch 183, 188, and 388). It is difficult to be certain of the chronology of the drawings, but I believe the sheet in Amsterdam (Ben. 188) was the initial study, followed by Benesch 388 (in a private collection) and the sheet in Berlin (Ben. 183).<sup>7</sup> The Amsterdam drawing (fig. 13) in particular gives an indication of Rembrandt's deliberations on this figure. It shows two full versions of the figure and additional redrawing of a hand and boot. Her head is rendered again on the verso. It seems clear that the full figure on the left precedes the one on the right, as the latter comes closer to the final pose of the woman in the print. Two elements of change are interesting. The first and most obvious is the position of the hands. The woman's left hand in the drawing (her right in the print) is changed from being pointed down to reaching up. Christ is not depicted in this rendering, but it is clear that at this point the intention of her reaching toward the bottom of Christ's cloak has occurred to Rembrandt. Benesch 388 (fig. 14) shows the woman reclined more diagonally in accordance with the final print, but here Rembrandt has tried to give her a supplicant pose, with both hands raised in prayer. He seems to have discarded this idea, and incorporated the praying hands into the poses of the woman whose back is turned to us and the old woman who hovers above her, casting a shadow of her hands onto Christ's tunic. By the time the Berlin drawing was made (Benesch 188, fig. 15), Rembrandt had more or less settled on the composition of the reclining woman and was working on the nuances of the group around her. The rendering on the copperplate may have been already underway by the time the Berlin drawing was carried out.



Figure 13. Rembrandt, *Study for a Woman in the Hundred Guilder Print*, ca. 1648, pen and ink with white heightening. Amsterdam, Rijksprentencabinet (artwork in the public domain)



Figure 14. Rembrandt, *Study for a Woman in the Hundred Guilder Print*, ca. 1648, pen and brown ink. Private collection (artwork in the public domain)



Figure 15. Rembrandt, *Study for a Woman in the Hundred Guilder Print*, ca. 1648, pen and brown ink. Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett (artwork in the public domain)

Returning to the Amsterdam drawing (fig. 13), the woman's right hand is basically the same in both full figures and in the detail, but the position of the leg has changed. In the left rendering it is more bent at the knee and upright, and the hand is reaching toward the boot. In the right figure the leg is more outstretched and the hand merely rests beside the leg. All show a bare knee and contrast one booted foot with one bare (as does Benesch 388). In the Berlin sheet and in the print both of the woman's feet are bare. In the initial stages of rendering this figure, then, it appears that Rembrandt conveyed a greater state of dishevelment. That bedraggled appearance extends to her ample—possibly bared—breasts in the left figure of the Amsterdam sheet. But that is not all. In this initial sketch her skirt is hiked up over her knee, and while her pudendum is shaded and obscured by another pentimento of the hand, it is nonetheless clearly indicated. Her revealed body is the key detail for her identification. There is no other reason for her sexuality to be exposed in this manner within such a context; it can only be a sign of her particular distress—an inability to stop the flow of her menses. In her final appearance in *The Hundred Guilder Print*, Rembrandt, like every other artist who rendered the woman with the issue of blood before him, chose a more discreet handling and identified her by the gesture of touching Christ's cloak, rather than by her flow of blood. In the print, her hand extends up and backward slightly in space, and her fingers come to rest exactly parallel with Christ's hem at the protrusion of his toe. This gesture is a sign of her faith, her boldness, and ultimately her good fortune, that she will be counted among the healed and the saved.

By recognizing elements from the visual tradition and textual sources beyond Matthew 19, this study points to a mode of production and reception that is referential rather than merely illustrative. Indeed, it suggests larger themes that are alluded to in Matthew 19 itself, but become apparent and take on prominence only through exegesis, by constructing a more comprehensive picture culled from multiple reference points in diverse passages of the Bible and compiled from their attendant visual traditions. In the expanded form of this study, it will be shown that this multifaceted form of production and associative manner of viewing is analogous to the exegetical form of reading expected in the production of the official Calvinist States Bible, and the path to salvation through faith will be demonstrated as the main theme of Rembrandt's print.

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To Alison Kettering I owe a special debt, worth far more than a hundred guilders. Without her guidance, which began at Carleton College and has continued steadily to the present, I would not have ventured into art history, nor come to appreciate the subtleties of Dutch art and the work of Rembrandt in particular. She also introduced me to gender studies as an integral aspect of art history. Lastly, she taught me to think with great breadth and even greater precision.

*Paul Crenshaw is Associate Professor of Art History at Providence College in Providence, Rhode Island, and is currently vice president of the Historians of Netherlandish Art. He is the author of Rembrandt's Bankruptcy: The Artist, His Patrons, and the Art Market in Seventeenth-Century Netherlands (Cambridge University Press, 2006) and has contributed to various scholarly publications, exhibition catalogues, and journals in early modern studies. His forthcoming book with Amsterdam University Press is titled Calumny: Four Judgments in Rembrandt's Art.*

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<sup>1</sup>Erik Hinterding, Ger Luijten, and Martin Royalton-Kisch, *Rembrandt the Printmaker* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 255. Curiously, the letter was originally published in 1880 but was overlooked by Rembrandt scholars for 120 years.

<sup>2</sup>Gary Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book* (New York: Abrams, 2006), 325–27, was mainly interested in Waterloo's third quatrain, which is clearly anti-Semitic. In a forthcoming study I will suggest that the fourth quatrain is directly related to the central theme of the print: divine judgment. For an additional discussion of the relationship between Waterloo's poem and Matthew 19, see Shelley Perlove and Larry Silver, *Rembrandt's Faith: Church and Temple in the Dutch Golden Age* (University Park, Pa.: Penn State University Press, 2009), 272–74.

<sup>3</sup>Schwartz, *The Rembrandt Book*, is the only scholar to my knowledge who has suggested that thematic elements of the print extend beyond Matthew 19.

<sup>4</sup>I will explore this idea in greater depth in a forthcoming study in a chapter titled "Value and Judgment in Rembrandt's Hundred Guilder Print" in my book *Calumny: Four Judgments in Rembrandt's Art*, under contract with Amsterdam University Press.

<sup>5</sup>Interestingly, when I first discussed this project with Father Brian Shanley, O.P., president of Providence College, his immediate response upon seeing the print was to ask, "Is she touching his cloak?" This reinforced for me the profound theological significance of her gesture.

<sup>6</sup>See Joan R. Branham, "Bloody Women and Bloody Spaces; Menses and the Eucharist in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 30, no. 4 (Spring 2002): 15–22.

<sup>7</sup>I thank Jan Leja for sharing an unpublished catalogue entry on Benesch 388. Benesch did not group this sheet among the other studies for the *Hundred Guilder Print*.

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