

Strategies of Ambiguity in Rembrandt's *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*, c. 1631

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Abstract

Rembrandt van Rijn's etching known as *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* c. 1631, is one of the artist's earliest and most controversial etchings, complicated by the obscure and thus far unidentified theme of the image. This study reconsiders longstanding questions concerning the identity of the figure in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* as a possible likeness of Rembrandt's later wife Saskia, within a discussion that broadens the current evidence on seventeenth-century Dutch artistic practices in using models to negotiate socially fraught depictions of recognizable women depicted nude. The study further considers the ambiguity of the subject as Rembrandt's early professional strategy to construct a deeply personal image with public appeal.



Fig. 1: Rembrandt van Rijn, *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*, (second state), c. 1631 © Trustees of the British Museum. 177 x 160 mm, etching.

Rembrandt van Rijn's (1606-1669) etching known as *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* (c. 1631), depicts a corpulent, unclothed female figure seated in a minimally described outdoor setting (fig. 1).¹ The image is one of Rembrandt's earliest and most controversial etchings. Critical reception and interpretation of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* has been complicated by the obscure and thus far unidentified theme of the image, prompting a series of unresolved attempts to identify the figure. The etching's intransigent subject is closely tied to the enigmatic nude woman, the obscure visual context, and an absence of iconography and attributes, making it difficult to relate the figure to traditional subjects associated with the female nude. There is no clear iconographic anchor to classical figures, such as Diana, Bathsheba, or Venus. Based on these elusive visual cues, some scholarship has determined that the work simply has 'no subject.'² Others suggest that the print was to be paired with a contemporary etching identified as the goddess Diana (c. 1631), a figure who possesses a similarly rotund form.³ If regarded as one of a pair it has been suggested that the figure depicted in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* may best be understood as a nymph, or perhaps a pendant figure of a like classical subject—Bathsheba, Susanna, or Venus. While questioning the identity of the figure and the subject of the print, scholars have also commented on a likeness between the seated woman depicted in the etching and Rembrandt's future wife, Saskia van Uylenburgh (1612-1642), whom he met in 1631 during his first year in Amsterdam, and later married in 1634.⁴

Investigating the implications of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* as a representation of Saskia presents problematic interpretive issues, based on the social disapprobation attendant upon women who posed nude in the seventeenth century.⁵ Recent scholarship on the social perception of artists' models in the early modern Netherlands further suggests that women who posed nude were typically prostitutes or other women of low social regard.⁶ The idea that a respectable, middle-class woman such as Saskia would allow herself to be displayed unclothed in an image that was sold to the public is often quickly

dismissed. However, visual and textual evidence from the seventeenth century Netherlands demonstrates that, in some cases, the depiction of identifiable women posing nude involves a more nuanced negotiation between the artist's creative processes, publicity practices, and the complex use of studio models in seventeenth-century Dutch imagery. Women of respectable origins as well as those of high rank, whose reputations were dependent on their good social and moral standing, were sometimes depicted partially unclothed in imagery. The question remains as to how a woman might be portrayed thus and still retain social respectability. Rembrandt's resolution to this problematic intersection of public and private in one of his earliest commercial etchings may also give an indication of his working methods for images of this type that follow later in his career.

This study will reconsider longstanding questions concerning the identity of the ungainly figure in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* as a possible likeness of Saskia. In doing so, this essay will reframe Rembrandt's calculated use of an equivocal subject and figure in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*, an image that appears to reference Saskia, within the context of seventeenth century Dutch artists' creative and practical use of models in constructing the female nude. The seeming likeness to Saskia can be reconciled with the nude form if *Naked Woman Seated on an Mound* is interpreted as a depiction of a desirable physical type that is not necessarily intended to be a literal portrait of Saskia, but rather a figure that evokes the features of Saskia as an exemplar of a feminine ideal. One may assume that women with general features similar to Saskia had significant personal appeal to the artist, because such women reappear in a number of Rembrandt's paintings and prints throughout the scope of his career. Rembrandt's successful negotiation of the delicate boundary between portrait likeness and anonymous model in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* is an approach that is invested in the print's overarching strategy of ambiguity. The female figure evokes the likeness of Saskia yet is generalised in order to stimulate wide-ranging viewer appeal.

While the woman in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* is an ideation derived from Saskia, the visual multivalence of a nude form without clear contextual or iconographic cues further allows the viewer to forge associations between the figure and any one of a number of nudes: Venus, Bathsheba, a genre theme of a pastoral peasant, among others, thus lending the greatest commercial potential to his design.⁷ Within the functional context of Saskia's relationship to the figure in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*, this essay will align Rembrandt's intentional ambiguity in the etching with the artist's emerging career ambitions during the 1630s. The visual and narrative ambiguity evidenced in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* as a work dated to the artist's first year as an independent businessman indicates that Rembrandt's sophisticated commercial strategies of vigorous self-promotion developed much earlier than studies of his workshop practice have thus far recognised, and were applied to his prints as well as paintings.⁸

Models and sitters in Rembrandt's imagery

The figure in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* is one of a number of unidentified women in Rembrandt's imagery, a consistent feature in the artist's *oeuvre* that contributes to the complex topography of his paintings, prints and drawings. The likenesses of numerous unidentified figures in Rembrandt's paintings and prints have traditionally been identified as 'portraits' of members of the artist's circle of family and friends. Until recently, for example, Rembrandt's images of an old woman reading, such as *The Prophetess Anna* (known as 'Rembrandt's Mother', 1631; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam), have been nostalgically perceived as meditative portraits of his own mother.⁹ Depictions of young women with individualised features have often been identified as Rembrandt's wife Saskia van Uylenburgh, and his later companions whom he did not marry, Geertje Dirckx, and Hendrickje Stoeffels. Discerning with some degree of accuracy which of these family members may appear in particular paintings, prints and drawings has been a central focus of Rembrandt scholarship from the

eighteenth century, and is an issue that has often been clouded by romanticised notions of the artist's life.¹⁰

To nineteenth-century observers, Saskia seemed to permeate a number of Rembrandt's early images. For over a century, these images were considered (and some still are) to be outright portraits of Saskia, despite the general lack of portrait conventions in many of the images.¹¹ Scholars first suggested Saskia might be the figure depicted in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* in the nineteenth century, an attribution based on the likeness of the woman in the etching to similar female figures in numerous paintings and prints made by Rembrandt before his wife's untimely death in 1642.¹² A central reason that scholars have suggested the *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* may represent Saskia is not only related to the unclothed figure's individualised facial features that are similar to other images of Saskia, but that Saskia (or a woman with strikingly similar features to known images of Saskia) seems to make a consistent reappearance throughout Rembrandt's early oeuvre at the time the artist met and married her, about the time *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* was produced. The approximate date of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*, c. 1631, was the year that Rembrandt permanently moved to Amsterdam from Leiden and began working in the studio of Hendrick van Uylenbergh, Saskia's guardian.¹³

Attributing identities to individual figures within Rembrandt's paintings and prints in order to establish the images as portraits has long interested historians of Dutch art, however, few distinctions have been made between the role of model and sitter in his or other seventeenth-century Netherlandish artists' works.¹⁴ Models can be understood as figures whose likenesses, accurate or loosely based, are used by the artist as a direct template or as a source of inspiration for visually constructed figures. The presence of an anonymous model ostensibly does not affect the viewer's response to the subject of the picture, nor does it always lend meaning to the work as the viewer is intended to absorb it. A sitter,

however, is a recognisable figure whose presence in some way drives the meaning of the work.¹⁵ When an identifiable figure is included in an image that is not intended as a traditional portrait construct, giving an image portrait-like qualities, the difficulty lies in determining whether that figure is intended to be recognised or not by the viewing audience. It is uncertain whether the figure in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*, if it represents Saskia, would have been recognised by anyone but a small, exclusive circle, or perhaps by anyone other than the artist himself. An investigation of the figure's identity is necessary not only because it raises larger issues of strategic ambiguity and creativity in Rembrandt's early work, but also because questions of the figure's identity inform an understanding of the print for twentieth and twenty-first centuries viewers.

The relationship between painters and their models has been regarded through a romanticised lens as a titillating exchange between the virile male artist and his inspirational muse, enlivening the reality of what was typically a practical and often mundane domestic or commercial partnership.¹⁶ In studies exploring the studio mechanics of seventeenth-century Dutch art, public perception of models has only recently been more deeply investigated in terms of the social stigma such positions held for women who posed nude.¹⁷ There was no professional collective of painters' models in the seventeenth-century Netherlands, giving way to the widespread assumption that candidates were either gleaned from artist's acquaintances, or if a nude figure was required, from brothels and other low-life contexts.

The role of an unclothed model in Dutch painting becomes more problematic when the figure is recognisable to viewers, raising the question of whether the figure is intended to be merely an anonymous placeholder as a model or whether the figure takes on aspects of the traditional role of a sitter as an individual whose likeness is intended to be known. In this manner, *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* inhabits the realm of an image that functions more as a conceptual, rather than literal portrait. The print functions as a conglomerate of a figure with facial

features evoking Saskia's likeness, combined with a nude body that is most likely a model or a creative construction *uit de geest* (from the imagination), and not Saskia herself. In *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*, Rembrandt blurs the boundary between the role of model and sitter to achieve a work that had an intensely personal meaning to the artist by rendering a figure with decidedly Saskia-like features while remaining ambiguous enough in subject to stimulate wide public appeal. Indeed, it is Rembrandt's skillful negotiation between these binary oppositions of public and private that make this print intriguing.

One of the more complex interpretive aspects of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* as it relates to Saskia and current perceptions of the print is the unclothed figure and its attendant titular description as 'naked' as opposed to 'nude'. The first recorded mention of the etching is found in Bartsch's catalogue of Rembrandt's prints from 1797, where he lists the work descriptively as 'Une Nue Femme sur la butte', or *A Nude Woman on a Mound*.¹⁸ Divisions in meanings of 'naked' versus 'nude' have been defined primarily by twentieth-century art critics to distinguish between the natural body and the artistically refined idealised human form, most notably by Kenneth Clark, whose influential *Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* declares the aesthetic superiority of idealised nudes done in the classical manner.¹⁹ 'Nakedness' thus introduces a less refined tone to the work, predicated on the intimation of a more sexualised, earthy female type. As Ruth Barcan describes, 'Nakedness is imperfect and individual; the nude is ideal and universal. Nakedness is nature; nudity, culture.'²⁰ It is the naturalism of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*, her textured flesh arranged in folds, lines and gathers, that has elicited vociferous and universal condemnation from a number of critics ranging from Andries Pels and Gerard de Lairesse to Kenneth Clark in historical and modern criticism of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*.²¹

The modern distinction between "naked" and "nude" did not exist in seventeenth-century Dutch culture. The term *naakt*, equivalent to "naked" was sometimes used in documents and inventories of paintings to describe the unclothed human

form.²² Rembrandt's *Naked Woman* is perhaps unsettling because her nakedness implies a measure of eroticism, overtly displayed.²³ It is the unvarnished naturalism of the fleshy nude that has driven predominately critical response to *Naked Woman Seated on A Mound*, a trend that began in the late seventeenth century and continues through most contemporary discourse.²⁴ Among Rembrandt's nudes, it is *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* that has been singled out as especially offensive.

Critical and interpretive assessment of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* was first documented in 1681 in a verse by Dutch poet Andries Pels describing the woman in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* as 'no Greek Venus.' This comment, published less than two decades after Rembrandt's death, established a clear pattern for later critical dismissal of the figure that was often in reaction to the physical form rather than interpretive in content.²⁵ Therefore, since Rembrandt consistently returned to a certain type of female figure akin to *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* in numerous paintings and prints for the duration of his career, these forms may represent the artist's ideal feminine form, if not a variation on a more general northern ideal.²⁶

Identity and the problem of nakedness

The problematic relationship between the unclothed figure in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* with Saskia stem from Rembrandt's often discussed social and professional ambitions and attendant social and moral pressures facing respectable women of the seventeenth-century. If *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* indeed represents Saskia's likeness, it seems unlikely that the shrewdly business-minded and upwardly mobile artist choose to display his betrothed as a nude. Because, however, recognisable women did sometimes appear partially nude in imagery, under what circumstances might a respectable female pose unclothed? In examining the broader range of Rembrandt's imagery, it is also evident that he placed recognizable figures in visual contexts that were less than

favorable, indicating a tendency of the artist to picture those in his intimate circle in pictorial imagery potentially fraught with social complications.

Consensus on the low opinion of the nude model in Dutch society relies on a small number of extant documents taken from legal disputes that refer to models as prostitutes or women of questionable reputation.²⁷ These cases have given rise to the idea that nude images made after life must have been made using only women of low social status. The lack of extant documents on other sources for artists' models has resulted in a generalisation of all nude models as women of morally questionable position. Although prostitutes or other women in difficult social positions were available as nude models, a closer examination of artists' variable studio practices reveals alternate approaches in which a nude body, such as in Rembrandt's *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* could be constructed from a multiplicity of sources that were not solely dependent on the availability of prostitutes to act as models.

A number of pragmatic concerns involved in the production of paintings and prints encourage a more nuanced understanding of women who posed for artists and the shades of social acceptability associated with this act. The practice of keeping a *schilderkamer*, or studio located in an artist's home,²⁸ alongside his family makes suspect the notion that all artists would have brought prostitutes as models into this environment. While artists did use women from the fringes of society as models, this does not preclude the use of reputable women as nudes, or more accurately, as inspiration or as a point of departure for nude figures in imagery. The likeness of Saskia's face combined with an unclothed model's body resolves the difficulty in determining the identity of the figure pictured in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*, if the form is a composite drawn together from disparate sources. While the face of the figure, as art historians have commented, is remarkably like other known images of Saskia, the body could have been borrowed from that of an anonymous model, or based on the preferred female body type ubiquitous in northern European imagery.

The Dutch, Flemish, and German tradition of naturalistic nudes that fall outside of the classically idealised tradition may be seen in early fifteenth century examples, among them Jan (and Hubert?) van Eyck's full-bellied nude Eve from the *Ghent Altarpiece*, 1432 (Saint Bavo Cathedral, Ghent). The recurring northern feminine physical type of heavy body, large belly and breasts, may be seen in a number of sixteenth-century prints including Hans Sebald Beham's ribald *Bathing Women*, 1548 (fig. 2; London, British Museum),²⁹ and numerous images by Lucas van Leyden,³⁰ artists whose works were collected by Rembrandt.



Fig. 2: Hans Sebald Beham after Bartel Beham, *Bathing Women*, 1548. © Trustees of the British Museum. 83 x 57 mm, engraving.

An exemplar of the seventeenth-century corpulent nudes that are iconic in northern European imagery and in Rembrandt's prints from the 1630s can be located in Willem Buytewech's *Bathsheba Receiving David's Message*, from 1615 (London, British Museum; fig. 3).³¹



Fig. 3: Willem Buytewech, *Bathsheba Receiving David's Message*, ca. 1615, © Trustees of the British Museum. 172 x 156 mm, etching.

Buytewech's *Bathsheba* is strikingly similar to *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* in both composition and in the type of large nude shown seated on a drape in a gardenscape. Like *Naked Woman*, Bathsheba twists to one side on her cloth-covered seat, with the left side of her body cast in shadow. Despite Buytewech's large nude as one of many corpulent northern female subjects predating *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*, it is only Rembrandt's figure that critics have focused on as a work considered both curious and grotesque. Also unlike Rembrandt's *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*, Buytewech's nude is easily identifiable as the biblical figure Bathsheba. Buytewech's Bathsheba is accompanied by familiar iconographic staging; the old woman who tends to her as she bathes, and in the tradition of Bathsheba imagery inherited from the middle ages, the small figure of David is visible in the distance as a voyeur. In sharp contrast, *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* is removed from any such thematic narrative context.

Although the use of studio lay figures has been only recently reinvestigated in any depth as part of studio practice in depicting the human figure in seventeenth-century Dutch art,³² the probable use of models or stock body types for the unclothed portions of figures in portraits of respectable Dutch women has been overlooked. Seventeenth-century legal documents refer to just such a case in which the head and body of a painted figure are taken from different sources. In 1676, Geertuijt de Haes filed a legal complaint against Lodewijk van der Helst, a dispute based on De Haes' claim that the artist had painted her in the nude as the figure of Venus. Testimony in defense of Van der Helst stated that he had 'painted her face and hands from life, but that the body was created from his imagination.'³³ In the same manner of production Eric Jan Sluijter's recent assessment of Rembrandt's canon of nudes, in fact, finds the body of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* to be plausibly an invention 'uit de geest' (from the artist's imagination).³⁴ Visual precedents for the general figure type seen in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* are found in the robust, even rotund, bodies long visible in imagery produced throughout Germany and the Low Countries.

The use of models for the bodies of partially unclothed female sitters in portraits is a practice that was likely used in numerous images of elite women appearing bare-breasted in seventeenth-century historiated portraits.³⁵ Marie de' Medici, the Queen of France, is depicted in historiated portrait form with bared breasts three times within the series of twenty-four paintings she commissioned from Rubens between 1621-25, to decorate her Luxembourg Palace in Paris. This type of image of the bare-breasted Queen is exemplified by her *Portrait of Marie de' Medici as Bellona*, c. 1622-25 (Louvre, Paris), although it seems unlikely that the Queen of France would have sat partially nude for Rubens' allegorical portrait. Further instances of this type can be seen in paintings of elite Dutch women such as Gerard van Honthorst's, *Daughters of Johan van Roode as the Three Graces*, 1645 (Museum Slot Zuylen, Oud-Zuilen), whose portraits include one of the young women of with a bared breast.³⁶

The exposed body of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* emphasises breasts and protruding belly as the most prominent physical features of the figure. Bared breasts, among other connotations, historically evoke references to mercy, charity and humility. Though bared breasts probably did have had sexual inferences in most images, the conflated qualities of virtue and sexuality symbolised by exposed breasts—as just one example—have a lengthy visual history within religious imagery, such as the type represented by the *Madonna lactans* and personifications of *caritas*.³⁷ The focus on bared breasts and abdomen as distinctive features of the female figure in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* evoke a quasi-allegorical figure of fertility, although not one found in Dutch emblem books or Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (first published in the northern Netherlands in 1644), and allude to the ideal of a fruitful feminine form.

The practice of combining disparate sources to create a conglomerate human figure that represents an ideal female type certainly had implications for artistic skill and talent. The exercise challenged the artist to develop a form selected from a model and the artist's own skill, requiring aesthetic acumen in the selective process and imagination to join these features with forms *uit de geest*. In this way, the artistic process of aesthetic judgment and selection recalls the skill of Zeuxis, the ancient Greek painter who is reputed to have constructed the perfect female form by combining the most appealing features of five beautiful women. Later Rembrandt invoked direct parallels between himself and Zeuxis as masters of artistic process of aesthetic selection at the end of his career with the *Self Portrait as Zeuxis* (1662, Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz Museum).³⁸ *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* is a visual construction, I argue, that is predicated on such selective processes, a formulation that also allows the image to permeate the distinction between Saskia-like portrait and nude from the historical/allegorical tradition. Rembrandt's decision to produce this image in print form further comments on artistic ability. The artist's skilled handling of the engraving

technique is emphasised by strong shadowy contrasts and the display of surface texture in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*.

Rembrandt's women and the feminine ideal

Naked Woman Seated on a Mound was printed in two states and copied by Wenceslas Hollar in 1635, indicating that it was a popular image with a receptive audience at the time Rembrandt made it.³⁹ The exposed body of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* emphasises breasts and protruding belly as the most prominent physical features of the figure. Thus, among other multivalent meanings, *Naked Woman on a Mound* emphasises the propagatory potential of Saskia in particular and women in general, evoking the promise of fertility and ripeness in depicting the full-bodied woman sitting in proximity to the earth. If *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* was indeed intended as a pendant nymph or attendant to the Diana etching, the association of that classical theme with fertility and pregnancy would be skillfully evoked in the undulating belly and pendulous breasts of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*. Moreover, A surge in the publication of instructive prints and literature on reproduction and bodily processes in the Netherlands during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries reflects a keen scientific and cultural interest in female reproduction, an interest also evoked by images of fertile female bodies such as *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*.⁴⁰

Naked Woman Seated on a Mound, printed in two states and copied, was likely in such high demand because images of sexually 'coy young women' were a longstanding and popular theme in northern Europe imagery.⁴¹ The figure looks assertively at the viewer, an action that personalises (and sexualises) the figure, and according to Eric Jan Sluijter, removes the naked woman as subject from the remote position of a merely being a passive artist's model.⁴² The body seated on the drape calls attention to uncovered flesh. The nude is adorned only with one visible earring, giving the impression of the figure as having recently been dressed. Her long hair is loose and free-flowing, mimicking the cloth drape and

furthering the casual impression of intimacy. The erotic and sexual appeal of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* expands on associations with fertility that stem from the northern European feminine prototype, in which the figure depicted in the print possesses a rounded belly and breasts that suggests fecundity.

In *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*, Rembrandt presents the viewer with an image that alludes to the power and potential of a woman's body as a source of generation. Indeed, in addition to the practice of using Saskia's face along with a model's body as an ideal type in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*, Rembrandt also produced two paintings of Saskia shortly after their marriage depicting his wife in the guise of the goddess of fertility. As Rembrandt's new wife, Saskia appears as Flora first in 1634 (St. Petersburg, Hermitage). The artist quickly produced another image of Flora in *Saskia van Uylenburgh in Arcadian Costume* (Saskia as Flora), 1635 (fig. 4; National Gallery, London).



Fig. 4. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Saskia van Uylenburgh in Arcadian Costume* (Saskia as Flora), 1635.
© The National Gallery, London. 123.5 x 97.5 cm, oil on canvas.

Both images of Saskia as Flora emphasise the protruding abdomen of each of the figures using her voluminous garments, in a manner similar to the bulging stomach of the female in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*. Both Flora pictures are approximate to the attributed date for *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*. Saskia therefore appears as a vehicle for an ideal notion of beauty and fertility within a range of his paintings and prints, based on the artist's personal preference and the pervasive northern feminine type. Rembrandt seems so captivated by this corporeal female body, its sensuality and creative power, that he revisited the form and pose again, modified in *Bathsheba* (Paris, Louvre), from 1654, a painting that has been widely interpreted by art historians as a representation of his domestic companion at the time, Hendrickje Stoffels.⁴³

While the Dutch practice of combining the nude body of a model with different physical features can explain the use of an identifiable woman as a facet of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*, it remains to be seen why Rembrandt might incorporate Saskia into this particular image. Rembrandt's use of Saskia as a point of departure in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* appears to be part of a larger pictorial practice shifting toward ambiguity or blurred categories (history, genre, portraiture) in subject begun by the newly independent artist in the 1630s, and the nude print represents one of the earliest examples of this pictorial approach in his commercial oeuvre. In addition to *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*, Saskia's features, as well as Rembrandt's, have been noted separately in a number of paintings that are generally not considered to be portraits and were made during the later 1630s. In terms of social acceptability, these figures depict the recognisable Rembrandt and Saskia in an unusual series of historical roles that may be perceived as unflattering or even villainous. Take, for example, *Samson Threatening His Father-in-Law*, from circa 1635 (Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Berlin), in which Rembrandt has been identified as the aggressive figure of Samson. The likeness of Saskia is thought to have been included as the treacherous Delilah in *The Blinding of Samson*, 1636 (Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt am Main). Continuing with the dramatic biblical theme, Rembrandt's

wife perhaps appears again as the bride in *Samson's Wedding Feast*, 1638 (fig. 5; Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden).⁴⁴



Fig. 5: Rembrandt van Rijn, *Samson's Wedding Feast*, 1638. Photographer, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, 175 x 126 cm, oil on canvas.

A painting that is largely accepted as a double-portrait of Rembrandt and his first wife Saskia, identified as *The Prodigal Son*, 1636 (Fig. 6; Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden), depicts the two in the unflattering role of tavern-dwellers.⁴⁵



Fig. 6: Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Prodigal Son*, 1636. Photographer, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, 161 x 131 cm oil on canvas.

For an ambitious couple such as Rembrandt and Saskia, some scholars assert that the implication of moral aberrance in *The Prodigal Son* would have been detrimental to their social and financial goal of achieving a state of middle class social respectability.⁴⁶ Arguments refuting the relationship of the figure in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* to Saskia in particular overlook Rembrandt's use of his own likeness as well as Saskia's as figures that are glaringly unvirtuous. The implications of the low-life double-portrait where Rembrandt depicts his wife in the socially unacceptable role of a tavern harlot are especially notable in this context. The artist appears to have had no compunction in placing both himself

and his wife not only as the tortured, duplicitous and sexually charged biblical figures of Samson and Delilah, but also as a whore and as a drunkard.



Fig 7. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Beggar Seated on a Bank*, 1630 © Trustees of the British Museum. 116 x 70 mm, etching.

Moreover, Rembrandt's own features appear in a number of less than favorable social contexts, including as a figure amongst the mob participating in the stoning of St. Stephen, 1625 (Lyon, Musée des Beaux Arts), and as a filthy, shouting beggar (fig. 7; London, British Museum).⁴⁷ While likenesses of known women in socially suspect roles was not the standard for portraiture, other examples of well-regarded women with a public profile cast in socially compromising situations are known: James Welu considers the female tippler in *Carousing Couple*, 1630 (Louvre, Paris) a self-portrait of Judith Leyster.⁴⁸ *Naked Woman on a Mound* is an image that encompasses Rembrandt's ideal of beauty and femininity, combining Saskia-like features and the repetition of this body type in a number of Rembrandt's nudes, much in the same way that voluptuous, fair-haired women with features recalling Isabella Brandt and Hélène Fourment

appear repeatedly in Rubens' paintings, though they are not necessarily literal portraits of Isabella and Hélène.⁴⁹

Conclusion: Marketing ambiguity in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*

Using widely distributed prints as vehicles to promote name-recognition was a strategy that provided more long-term benefits than merely the financial aspects of print selling. The painting workshop practice of the master has been presented in terms of creating a reputation designed to disperse his name, all with the aim of increasing fame. With *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* as an earlier exemplar, it appears that this practice extended to, or perhaps even began with, his early prints. The popularity of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* underscores the chasm between types of images that appealed to the buying public and those seen as worthy of acclaim by art critics, who criticised the naked figure. The image thus targets both elite print enthusiasts and members of a viewing public who would have been able to read the image from the point of view of broadly diverging contexts. The visual subtlety of Rembrandt's unclothed subject would have allowed viewers to elicit multivalent interpretations from the picture. In a printed work, the lack of a clearly identifiable figure, setting or subject might have stimulated interest from a potentially wider buying audience, making the print more marketable and therefore more profitable for the artist. The calculated liminal quality of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* becomes more apparent when considered within the avocation of print collecting during the seventeenth century, a practice that experienced a significant increase in popularity at this time.⁵⁰

Printed works on paper had once been more casually regarded, but by the seventeenth century they were perceived as objects of individual value that gained esteem for the artist who produced them and the collector who possessed them. As an artist and a collector, Rembrandt was familiar with market demand. Prints might be sold to dealers, individual patrons, or distributed to the public at fairs, among a variety of other ways of disseminating the images. Rembrandt

himself acquired large numbers of prints at auction. The motive for Rembrandt's collecting and purchasing habits were the subject of much speculation in critical commentary. In 1637, he bought forty lots of prints, demonstrating his own interest as a collector.⁵¹ In a well-known anecdote, Rembrandt reportedly paid the large sum of 1400 guilders at auction for fourteen engravings by printmaker Lucas van Leyden.⁵² Seventeenth-century Italian critic Filippo Baldinucci also claimed that Rembrandt bought impressions of his own prints back at auction as a way to increase their desirability and price.⁵³ At the time of his later insolvency, the 1656 inventory of Rembrandt's possessions recorded thirty-four albums of prints.⁵⁴

Graphic works have often been characterised as a reliable source of artists' incomes. The ambiguous subject in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* carries no rigidly fixed, specific iconographic meaning in order for Rembrandt to reap more profit from a wider audience. For a growing audience of select print connoisseurs, the passion for collecting all available states of a print was something Rembrandt must have used to his advantage. Rembrandt's practice of issuing prints with multiple states, some with only minute changes (as is the case with the two states of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*), can be viewed as a deliberate manipulation of the market similar to his well-known strategies to stoke demand for his paintings.⁵⁵ His student, Samuel van Hoogstraten, commented in his 1678 edition of *Inleiding tot de Hoogeschool der Schilderkunst* (Introduction to the Great School of Painting) on the fervor with which Rembrandt's prints were collected: 'the passion [for Rembrandt's prints] was so great at that time, that people would not be taken for true connoisseurs who did not have the Juno with and without the crown, the Joseph with the white face and the brown face and other such things.'⁵⁶ *Naked Woman Seated on Mound* was issued in two states, indicating the popularity of the image. Art critics' disdain for Rembrandt's nude had no apparent impact on public reception of the image. As a further testament to its appeal, *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* was copied in 1635 by Bohemian printmaker Wenceslas Hollar.⁵⁷

Seventeenth-century connoisseurs were concerned with acquiring individual impressions, states, and different papers as part of collecting Rembrandt's works. Even as early as 1649, a handbook was published to instruct collectors on how to distinguish between Rembrandt's original impressions and copies of his prints, which were already produced in large numbers by other artists.⁵⁸ In addition to the print as a financial venture, Rembrandt's conscious construction of *Naked Woman Seated on Mound* for the widest possible appeal would have accomplished an additional goal of making Rembrandt's name known to a public audience. Having recently moved to Amsterdam in 1631, Rembrandt faced a much more urban, cosmopolitan and competitive atmosphere than in Leiden.

As works that are defined by their production in multiples, their typically affordable prices, their portability, and most importantly, their growing status as objects of connoisseurship in the seventeenth century, prints provided an ideal mode of advertisement for an ambitious, emerging artist such as Rembrandt during his first year in Amsterdam. As for the curious female figure in the etching, Saskia's features subtly evoked in the face of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*, combined with a generic body representing the northern feminine ideal, converge to emphasize qualities about Saskia herself that Rembrandt probably found highly desirable. *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* speaks to Rembrandt's perception of Saskia's beauty and potential fecundity, all worthy virtues for an early modern woman and wife. With these appealing qualities, she represents an ideal woman and an ideal partner in their forthcoming marriage. *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* is ultimately characteristic of Rembrandt's work in that the seemingly simple image encapsulates a deeply personal sentiment for the artist, couched within an iconographically ambiguous format that would stimulate appeal among a scope of potential buyers.

¹ See Ruth Barcan. *Nudity: A Cultural Anatomy* (New York: Berg, 2004) and Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972). The current title likely comes from the catalogue description in Bartsch. See Adam von Bartsch, *Catalogue Raisonné de*

toutes les Estampes qui forment l'oeuvre de Rembrandt et ceux de ses Principaux Imitateurs (A. Danz, 1880): no. 189; F.W.H. Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Engravings and Woodcuts 1450-1700*, v. 9 (Amsterdam: Menno Hertzberger, 1949): 73; Hollstein v. 18, 96.

² '...it [*Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*] has come to be understood as having no subject.'

Holm Bevers and Barbara Welzel, *Rembrandt: The Master and His Workshop* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991): cat. no. 6.

³ See Volker Manuth, "'As stark naked as one could possibly be painted...': The Reputation of the Female Model in the Age of Rembrandt," *Rembrandt's Women*, Julia Lloyd Williams (ed.) (Edinburgh: National Gallery of Scotland, 2001), 47-48. Albert Blankert (ed.) *Rembrandt: A Genius and His Impact*, (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1997), 390, cat. no. 99.

⁴ The earliest is Alfred von Wurzbach, 'Ein dekaliertes Porträt der Saskia' *Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst* 11 (1876): 287.

⁶ For a discussion of Rembrandt's images that have variously identified as Saskia, see Stephanie Dickey, 'Rembrandt and Saskia: Art, Commerce, and the Poetics of Portraiture', *Rethinking Rembrandt* Alan Chong and Michael Zell (eds.) (Zwolle: Waanders Publishers, 2002): 17-47.

⁶ See Manuth, 47-50.

⁷ For a discussion of ambiguity as a wider strategy in the sixteenth-century printmaking tradition, see Jan Van der Stok, "Ambiguous Intentions, Multiple Interpretations: An 'other' Look at Printed Images from the Sixteenth Century" *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 51 (2001): 19-29.

⁸ Ernst van de Wetering, 'Multiple Functions of Rembrandt's Self-Portraits', *Rembrandt by Himself*, Christopher White (ed.) (London: National Gallery, 1999): 35.

⁹ Christiaan Vogelaar and Gerbrand Korevaar, 'Rembrandt in Leiden: his Town, Workshop and Models', Christiaan Vogelaar in *Rembrandt's Mother: Myth and Reality* (Leiden: Waanders, 2005): 26-27.

¹⁰ David R. Smith suggests that family members were so often depicted because they elicited Rembrandt's artistic empathy in various ways. David R. Smith, 'Rembrandt's Early Double Portraits and the Dutch Conversation Piece', *Art Bulletin* 64 (1982): 259-60

¹¹ Images of this type include *Saskia in Profile*, 1632 (Nationalmuseum, Stockholm); *Bust of a Young Woman Smiling* (Saskia van Uylenburgh?), 1633 (Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden); *Saskia in a Red Hat*, c. 1633-42 (Gemäldegalerie, Alte Meister Staatliche, Kustsammlungen, Kassel); *Saskia van Uylenburgh, Wife of the Artist*, 1638-40 (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.); *Saskia with a Red Flower*, 1641 (Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden), among others.

¹² Volker Manuth, "'As stark naked as one could possibly be painted...': the reputation of the nude model in the age of Rembrandt" in Williams: 48.

¹³ Julia Lloyd Williams, *Rembrandt's Women* (ed.) (New York: Prestel, 2001): 11,15.

¹⁴ See, for example, Dickey, 2002, 21-28; Alison McNeil Kettering's brief discussion of Gesina ter Borch in 'Ter Borch's Ladies in Satin', in *Looking at Seventeenth-century Dutch Art: Realism Reconsidered*, Wayne Franits (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997):104-106; Vogelaar and Korevaar, 20-28.

¹⁵ According to Madlyn Kahr, images that recall recognizable family members of artists directly draw some meaning from those likenesses. 'Some scholars have observed – I think correctly – a resemblance to Rembrandt himself in Samson in the scene with the father-in-law, and such a resemblance could also not be meaningless'. Madlyn Kahr, 'Rembrandt and Delilah', *Art Bulletin* 52 no. 2 (1973): 244-45.252.

¹⁶ Svetlana Alpers, *Rembrandt's Enterprise: The Studio and the Market* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988): 62-67.

¹⁷ See Manuth, 44-48.

¹⁸ Adam Bartsch, *Catalogue Raisonné de Toutes les Estampes Qui Forment l'Oeuvre de Rembrandt* (Vienna: A. Blumauer, 1797): 170-71;B198. 'Une feme nue très grasse, don't la tête est vue de face, le corps dirigé vers la droit de l'estampe. Elle est assise sur une elevation de terre couverte d'un drap. Elle s'appuye de son bras droit sur la butte, qui lui sert de siege, et s'accoude de l'autre sur une partie plus élevée de cette meme butte, où l'on voit sa chemise. On ne trouve ce morceau que très difficilment d'une belle épreuve.'; Hollstein also refers to the print

as 'Naked Woman Seated on a Mound,' see F.W.H. Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Engravings and Woodcuts 1450-1700*, v. 9 (Amsterdam: Menno Hertzberger, 1949): 73; Hollstein v. 18, 96.

¹⁹ Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: a Study in Ideal Form*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

²⁰ Ruth Barcan, *Nudity: A Cultural Anatomy* (New York: Berg, 2004): 33; For the etymology of "naked" and "nude," see Barcan 32.

²¹ See Clark and Seymour Slive, *Rembrandt and His Critics, 1630-1730* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1953): 83.

²² Schott, 86.

²³ Barcan 36; Simon Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 393.

²⁴ Erik Hinterding, Ger Luitjen and Martin Royalton-Kisch, *Rembrandt As Printmaker* (Amsterdam: Waanders Publishers, 2000): 101.

²⁵ Andreas Pels, *Gebruik en misbruik des toneels* (Amsterdam: Albert Magnus, 1681). "Als hij een' naakte vrouw, gelijk 't somtijds gebeurende,/ Zou schild'ren, tot model geen Griekse Venus keurde:/ Maar eer een' waschter, of turftreedster uit een' schuur,/ Zijn dwaaling noemende navolging van Natuur,/ Al't ander ydele verziering. Slappe borsten/ Verwongen handen, ja de neepen vans de borsten/ Des rijglifs in de buik, des kousebands om't been./t Moest al gevolgd zijn, of natuur was niet tevreem."

²⁶ Elizabeth Schott's dissertation argues that Rembrandt's female figures do not subscribe to a consistent physical type during his career, based on her own measurements of proportion. For my purposes, rather than specific body measurements, I am citing the general tendency of Rembrandt's female figures to appear broad-hipped, full-bellied, heavy and naturalistic in form; specifically, not idealised in the classical tradition. See Elizabeth Ann Schott, 'Representing the Body in the Seventeenth-century Netherlands: Rembrandt's Nudes Reconsidered', (Ph.D. diss, University of California, Berkeley, 2000), 74-75.113.

²⁷ Manuth, 47; Blankert notes that models were often recognised in paintings, but claims that was a dishonorable association because models were often prostitutes. Several primary sources referring to artists using prostitutes as models are cited. Albert Blankert, 'Excursus: Perfectly Beautiful and Stark Naked' in *Dutch Classicism* (Museum Boijmans van Beuningen Rotterdam, 2000): 18.

²⁸ Alpers, 65-66.

²⁹ F.W.H. Hollstein, *German Engravings, Etchings and Woodcuts ca. 1400-1700*, v. 3 (Amsterdam: Menno Hertzberger, 1954): 1; 208 ii; an engraving copied after a composition by Bartel Beham.

³⁰ F.W.H. Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts ca. 1450-1700*, v. 10 (Amsterdam, 1949): 60.

³¹ Hollstein, IV, 54, 55.

³² H. Perry Chapman, 'The Wooden Body: Representing the Manikin in Dutch Artists' Studios', *Lichaam en lichamelijkeheid in de Nederlandse kunst in Nederlands Kunsthistorische Jaarboek* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2008): 189-215.

³³ Abraham Bredius, *Künstler-Inventar, urkunden zur Geschichte der Holländischen kunst des XVten, XVIIten und XVIIIten Jahrhunderts*, v. 2 (Den Haag, 1916): 416. '...hy haar tronie en handen naar 't leven had geschildert, dog dat hy het lichaem uyt de geest daarby had gevoegd...'

³⁴ Sluijter: 274-5.

³⁵ Klaske Muizelaar and Derek Phillips, *Picturing Men and Women in the Dutch Golden Age: Paintings and People in Historical Perspective* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003): 149.

³⁶ Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Breast* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997): 25, 97; Muizelaar and Phillips describe breasts as 'fetishized' in seventeenth-century Dutch art, and cite their sexual connotations: 148.

³⁷ For a discussion of the *Madonna lactans* as a theme in late medieval Italian art, see Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951); see also Muizelaar and Phillips, chapter 4 note 86, David Freedberg, *The Power of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991): 324.; Eric Jan Sluijter, *Seductress of Sight: Studies in Dutch Art of the Golden Age*, (Zwolle: Waanders Publishers, 2000): 14-15.

³⁸ See Albert Blankert, 'Rembrandt, Zeuxis and Ideal Beauty', *Album Amicorum J. G. van Gelder*, ed. J. Bruyn, et al., (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1973).

³⁹ The whereabouts of the copperplate for *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* are currently unknown. See Erik Hinterding, Ger Luijten and Martin Royaltan-Kisch, eds. *Rembrandt the Printmaker*, (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2000): 357.

⁴⁰ See Karin Leonard, 'Vermeer's Pregnant Women: On Human Generation and Pictorial Representation', *Art History* 25 no. 3 (2002): 296 and Laura Gowing, *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth-century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003): 17.

⁴¹ Clifford Ackley, et. al., *Rembrandt's Journey: Painter, Draftsman, Etcher* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2003): 86.

⁴² Sluijter: 274.

⁴³ See Svetlana Alpers, 'The Painter and the Model': 147-158, and Margaret D. Carroll, 'Uriah's Gaze: 159-75, in 'Not Bathsheba', *Rembrandt's Bathsheba Reading King David's Letter*, Ann Jensen Adams, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁴⁰ Kahr: 244-45.

⁴⁵ For the range of literature, see, for example, Gerard Knuttel, *Rembrandt, de meester en zijn werk*. Amsterdam, 1956; Jakob Rosenberg, *Rembrandt, Life and Work*, Rev. ed. London, 1964; Ingvar Bergstrom, 'Rembrandt's Double Portrait of Himself and Saskia at the Dresden Gallery: A Tradition Transformed', *Nederlands Kunsthistorische Jaarboek* 17 (1966): 143-69; Kahr, 252-58; Christian Tümpel, 'Ikonographische Beiträge zu Rembrandt; zur Deutung und Interpretation seiner Historien', *Jahrbuch der Hamburger Kunstsammlungen* 13 (1968): 116-26; Annelise Mayer-Meintschel, 'Rembrandt und Saskia im Gleichnis vom verloren Sohn', *Jahrbuch Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden*, (1970/71): 44-54.

⁴⁶ Simon Schama, 1999, 380-82; One might also consider Gesina Ter Borch who was the probable model for the young woman in Gerard Ter Borch's so-called *Paternal Admonition*, 1654-55 (Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin).

⁴⁷ H. Perry Chapman, *Rembrandt's Self-Portraits: A Study in Seventeenth-century Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 11. B174.

⁴⁸ James Welu, et. al. *Judith Leyster: A Dutch Master and Her World* (New York, 1993): 46-47.

⁴⁹ Representations of Rubens' wives evoked by the artist's particular depictions of women have been explored in: Nancy T. Grummond, 'Helena Fourment and Rubens, Venus and Apelles', *Southeastern College Art Conference Review*, 9 no. 1(1976): 27-28; Albert Shug, "Helenen in Jedem Weibe" – Helene Fourment und ein besonderer Poträttypus im Spätwerk von Peter Paul Rubens', *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch* 46 (1985): 119-164.

⁵⁰ William W. Robinson, "This Passion for Prints" Collecting and Connoisseurship in Northern Europe during the Seventeenth century', *Printmaking in the Age of Rembrandt*, Clifford Ackley (ed.) (Boston, 1981): xxvii.

⁵¹ Ibid., xxxiv.

⁵² Ibid., xliii, note 96.

⁵³ Paul Crenshaw, *Rembrandt's Bankruptcy: The Artist, His Patrons, and the Art Market in Seventeenth-Century Netherlands* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 36-37.

⁵⁴ Ibid., xxxv; Rembrandt collected prints in albums categorised by artist: reproductive prints after Bruegel, Raphael, Michelangelo, Titian and Rubens were kept along with impressions by Lucas, Carracci, Goltzius and others. Rembrandt also kept albums of subjects including costume, landscape, exotic subjects and erotic prints. Richard Field, et.al., *Sets and Series: Prints from the Low Countries* (New Haven, 1984): 6.

⁵⁵ Van de Wetering, 34-5.

⁵⁶ Arnold Houbraken, *Inleiding tot de Hoogeschool der Schilderkunst I*, 1678, reprint Holland: (Davaco, 1969): 271.

⁵⁷ Williams: 79.

⁵⁸ Abraham Bosse, *Sentiments sur la distinction des diverses manieres de peintures,, desseins & gravures, & des originaux d'avec leurs copies*, Paris, 1649, p.82-85, cited in Eric Hinterding, 'The

History of Rembrandt's Copperplates, with a Catalogue of Those that Survive', *Simiolus* 22 no. 4 (1993): 264.

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