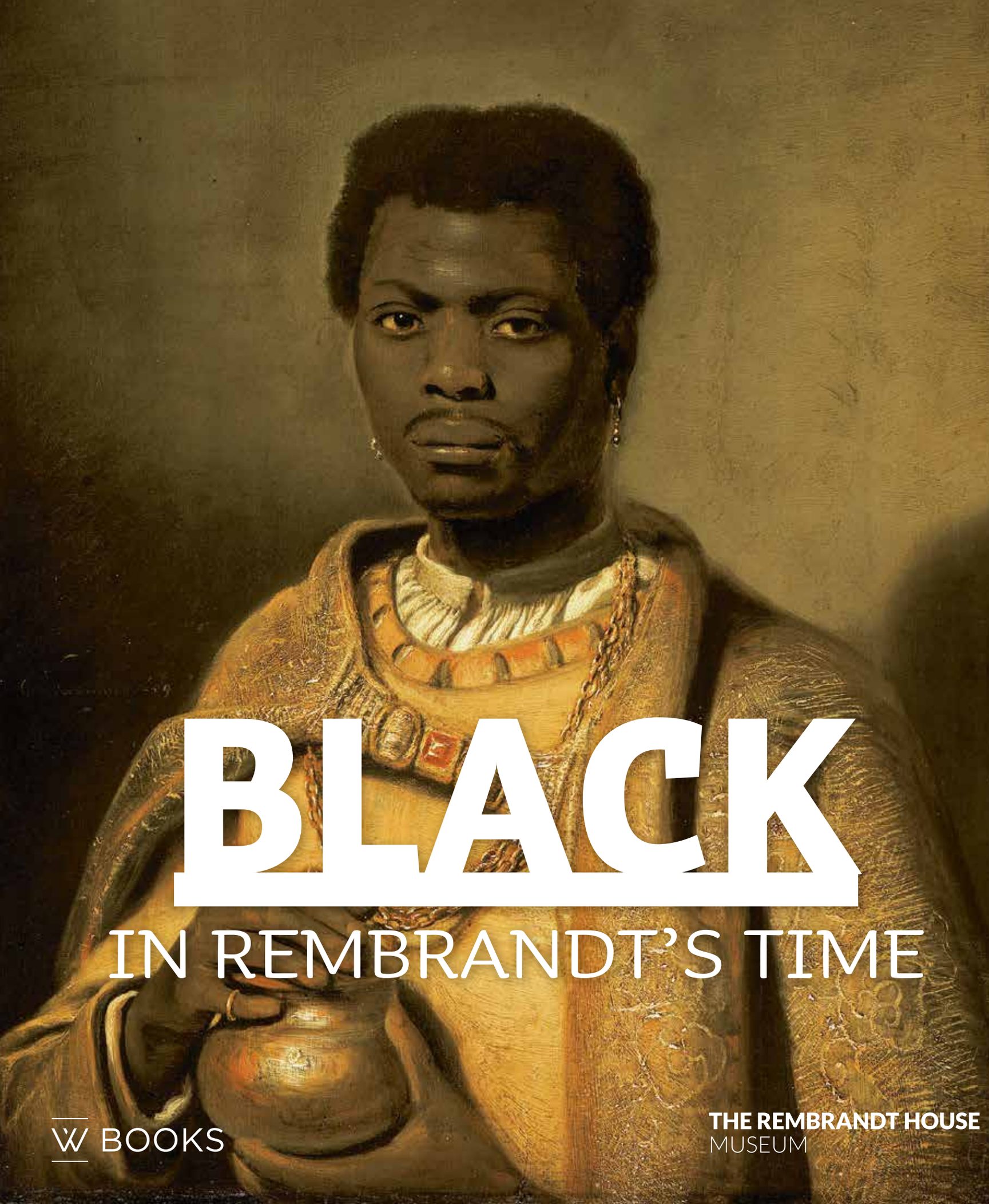

BLACK

IN REMBRANDT'S TIME

W BOOKS

THE REMBRANDT HOUSE MUSEUM

This book is published to accompany the exhibition *HERE. Black in Rembrandt's Time* in The Rembrandt House Museum, Amsterdam, 5 March through 31 May 2020.

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1. Rembrandt, *Two African Men*, 1661. Oil on canvas, 77.8 x 64.4 cm. The Hague, Mauritshuis, Abraham Bredius bequest

INTRODUCTION

EPCO RUNIA, STEPHANIE ARCHANGEL & ELMER KOLFIN

Rembrandt painted one of the most famous portraits of black people (fig. 1). This work of art is remarkable for several reasons. Black people can be found in seventeenth-century art with some regularity, usually in minor roles. But the men in this work are the main figures and the sole subjects. Furthermore, their distinctive facial features show that they were painted from life. And finally, Rembrandt even draws attention to the relationship between them; they seem comfortable with each other. The man in front is standing upright and has an energetic quality. The one in back seems more cautious and rests his chin on the other man's shoulder, suggesting a degree of intimacy. Were they friends? Or perhaps brothers?

Rembrandt's painting raises the question of what image of black people was conveyed by seventeenth-century art in the Netherlands. Did it change as the century went on, and if so, why? What sorts of black people were in fact present in Holland? And did they appear in works of art? Those questions are central to this book. The research presented here, in four essays and nine brief thematic sections, makes it clear that Dutch artists appear to have taken a special interest in black people, especially in the period 1620-1670. They made studies of models and incorporated the results into their finished art works. We thus find black people in many different roles, as Elmer Kolfin's essay shows. Alongside the stereotypical image of black boys as servants of the white elite, we also find black people as onlookers in biblical scenes, in the role of the black king come to adore the Christ child, and as central to the picture, for instance as a Mediterranean figure with a turban.

How can the existence of such art works be explained? The first factor is an increase in black residents, especially in Amsterdam. Recent research by Mark Ponte, who presents his results in this book, has revealed that there was a small black community living around Jodenbreestraat, in Rembrandt's neighbourhood. So there were black people around who could act as models. The second explanatory factor is closely tied to the first but more art historical in character. In this period, painters were increasingly likely to devote their energies to depicting reality, to working from nature. Rembrandt is the main pioneer in this line of development, a fact that can be seen from his artistic treatment of black people, as David de Witt demonstrates. A final noteworthy finding is that images relating to black people were not yet influenced predominantly by transatlantic slavery. Stephanie Archangel shows that the image of Africans did not acquire negative connotations until the late

BLACK BY REMBRANDT

ELMER KOLFIN

No other seventeenth-century artist depicted black people so often, in such varied ways, or in so many different art forms. It is difficult to arrive at an exact estimate, because attributions change, not all of the originals have been preserved, and it is not always entirely clear whether a particular figure is meant to represent a black person. But if we count all of Rembrandt's figures recognizable as black, there are at least twelve paintings, eight etchings, and six drawings. The fact that Rembrandt depicted black people in so many different ways is a reflection of his eagerness to experiment. Each time, he sought out new ways of capturing the black likeness.

PAINTINGS

The Baptism of the Eunuch, 1626 (Utrecht, Catharijneconvent)
Judas Repentant, 1629 (United Kingdom, private collection)
The Abduction of Proserpina, 1631 (Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie)
The Raising of Lazarus, 1632 (Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Museum of Art)
John the Baptist Preaching, 1634–1635 (Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie)
Adoration of the Magi, 1632 (St. Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum)
The Rape of Europa, 1632, Los Angeles (J. Paul Getty Museum)
Samson Threatening His Father-in-Law, 1635 (Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie)
The Entombment, 1635-1639 (Munich, Alte Pinakothek)
The Visitation, 1640 (Detroit, Detroit Institute of Art)
The Denial of Peter, 1660 (Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum)
Two African Men, 1661 (The Hague, Mauritshuis)

DRAWINGS

Two Drummers, c. 1638 (London, British Museum)
Four Musicians, c. 1638 (London, British Museum)
Study of a Boy with a Stick, c. 1639 (Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum)
Study of a Black Boy with a Turban, c. 1640 (United Kingdom, private collection)
Study of a Black Woman with a Headband and a Jug, c. 1642 (previously in the E.J. Reynolds Collection in Territet (Montreux))
Sketch of an African Man, c. 1647 (Amsterdam, Amsterdam Museum).

ETCHINGS

Gillis van Vliet after Rembrandt, *The Baptism of the Eunuch*, 1631
Bust of a Black Girl, c. 1631
Christ before Pilate, 1635-1636
The Beheading of John the Baptist, 1640
The Large Lion Hunt, 1641
The Baptism of the Eunuch, 1641
Christ Preaching (The Hundred Guilder Print), c. 1646-1650
Jesus and the Doctors, 1654

BLACK IN THE ART OF REMBRANDT'S TIME

ELMER KOLFIN

In the public debate on slavery in Dutch history, it has come to be taken for granted that black people in the art of Rembrandt's time were people who had been enslaved. Against that background, it seems superfluous to ask how Dutch involvement in slavery affected depictions of black people. The Netherlands traded in slaves, so black people in Dutch paintings must have been enslaved, it is thought. But is it really that simple?

Besides the well-known images of black boys looking up submissively from a corner of the scene as they help a white lady at her toilette (fig. 2), there are also sensitive portrayals of black people by artists such as Gerrit Dou (fig. 3) and of course the famous painting of two Africans by Rembrandt himself (fig. 1). These works do not allude to slavery or submissiveness in any identifiable way. Furthermore, a recent study has shown that there were more free black people on Dutch soil than previously thought.[1] Is it not possible that some works of art depict them? This all suggests that the question of the relationship between the rise of colonial slavery in the seventeenth century and depictions of Africans from that time was less straightforward than has been assumed.

The question should really be seen in the broader context of the Dutch ambition to play a dominant role in transatlantic trade. This essay sketches the ramifications of that historical context for the depiction of black people. Slavery plays an important role in this account, but it will also become clear that for a brief while, different perspectives on Africans existed side by side. We will ultimately see how and why one of those views became predominant.

WHAT DID PEOPLE IN HOLLAND KNOW ABOUT THE SLAVE TRADE?

It is a well-known fact that the seventeenth-century Republic of the Seven United Provinces succeeded in its attempt to dominate the slave trade and remained a major player for some time.[2] In the late seventeenth century, this success was largely attributed to Johan Maurits, the gouvernor-general of Dutch Brazil from 1636 to 1644. Arnoldus Montanus, the author of a standard reference work about the Americas published in 1671, described Maurits as the genius behind the Dutch slave trade.

Maurits, recognizing that great benefits accrued from the Angolan Negroes, and that the Spanish sugar mills could not run without them, resolved henceforth to bring the Negro trade under the control of the [Dutch] West India Company.[3]

Whether or not Montanus's account is correct, it is significant because it marks the point at which, according to a contemporary observer, the Dutch deliberately entered the transatlantic slave industry, seeing opportunities and seizing them.[4] Montanus made Johan Maurits the personification of this step.

Before Montanus's day, there was less awareness of transatlantic slavery. This becomes claer from a comparison of the travel books published by Cornelis Claesz around 1600 with those of the later publisher Jacob van Meurs from around 1670. Cornelis Claesz published books such as Jan Huygen van Linschoten's *Itinerario* (1595), Philips Pigafetta's *Beschryving vant groot en vermaert coninckrijck van Congo* (1596) en Pieter de Marees' *Beschryvinghe ende historische verhael van het gout koninckrijck van Gunea* (1605). These works contain frequent references to slavery, but almost always in local forms very unlike the slavery practiced in the Americas and the Caribbean region. The slave trade receives no more than a few scattered mentions: two in Jan Huygen van Linschoten, four in Pigafetta, and two in De Marees. Jan Huygen van Linschoten does make the prescient remark that Africans are 'the strongest in all the Orient, doing the dirtiest and toughest work'. He was talking about people from the area that is now Mozambique. Once a year, groups of them were transported to 'the Indies'.[5] Slave trading took place on a larger scale in the kingdom of Kongo, from the province of Mbamba, along what is now called the Congo River. From there, Van Linschoten writes, the Portuguese transported thousands of people a year to a variety of countries – it seems he could not be more precise.[6] Likewise, Pigafetta's book, a translation from the Italian edition of 1591 about the Portuguese exploration of Kongo, describes the slave trade only in sparse, vague terms.

2. Adriaen Hanneman, *Posthumous Portrait of Maria I Stuart (1631-1660) with a Servant*, c. 1664. Oil on canvas, 129.5 x 119.3 cm. The Hague, Mauritshuis

The clearest reference relates to the trade in gold, cotton, and enslaved people from a fort at the mouth of the Zambezi – again, Mozambique.[7] Pieter de Marees provides the most detail, but still no more than a few lines. He notes that this trade is concentrated mainly in the kingdom of Ardra, a coastal region now around the Benin-Nigeria border, where the strongest men can be found for the most demanding work. But he also approves of those from Angola, sent as trade goods to the sugar-producing areas of Sao Tomé (an island off the coast of Gabon) and Brazil. The trade is entirely in the hands of the Portuguese.[8]

Later in the century, Olfert Dapper wrote at length about the slave trade, in which the Dutch Republic was also involved by that stage. Dapper's *Naukeurige Beschrijvingen der Afrikaensche gewesten* (1668) was regarded as the authoritative text for many years and translated into English, French, and German. Dapper clearly states that North Africans had black slaves and traded in them – an important fact to which I return below – but he goes into the greatest detail about the European trade, explaining

3. Gerrit Dou, *Tronie of a Young Black Man*, c. 1635. Oil on panel, 42 x 33.5 cm. Hannover, Niedersächsisches Landesmuseum

DOM MIGUEL

ELMER KOLFIN

In the seventeenth century, having your portrait painted was expensive. A life-size, half-length portrait often cost as much as sixty guilders, at least two months' salary for a craftsman. Most black people in those days earned far too little to be able to afford such a painting, so there are hardly any independent portraits of black people from the period. Three exceptions are the portraits of the Congolese envoy Dom Miguel de Castro and his two servants Pedro Sunda and Diego Bemba (figs. 30-32). These are the only seventeenth-century Dutch paintings of black people with identifiable sitters.

Dom Miguel was clearly an important man. He went to Brazil to request the mediation of Governor Johan Maurits in a conflict between his uncle, the Count of Sonho, and the King of Kongo, Dom Garcia II. He brought a gift from the king for Johan Maurits: two hundred enslaved people. Dom Miguel then travelled on to the Republic with a letter for Stadtholder Frederik Hendrik. He visited Middelburg, where the West India Company commissioned six portraits of the envoy and his servants. According to the primary sources, these were ordered from a local painter named Becx. It remains unknown whether this was Jasper Becx or his brother Jeronimus.

Dom Miguel then went on to Amsterdam and The Hague. In Amsterdam, the Congolese delegation offered the city leaders a show of their physical prowess and demonstrated how they danced, how they honoured their ruler, and how their king established his authority by sitting on his throne in silence for long periods. They also displayed the elephant tails that they used as ornaments. Dom Miguel also attended a Catholic mass and received several Communion wafers for use at home in Congo.[1] After a nearly two-month stay, he returned to Africa. Before he left, he requested and was granted one of the portraits, along with a mirror worth thirty to thirty-six guilders. Three other portraits found their way into the collection of Johan Maurits, who presented them to King Frederick III of Denmark in 1654.[2] It is not clear what happened to the other two, which were probably of the servants.

It is rather improbable that the distinguished Dom Miguel ran into any of the free Africans living in the margins of Dutch society in Amsterdam or elsewhere, unless there was a chance encounter in the street. It is more likely that he encountered a black servant of a regent or merchant. In his portrait, Dom Miguel appears to be wearing the clothes Johan Maurits had presented him with in Brazil: a velvet cloak studded with silver and gold, a silk tunic, and a beaver hat with golden embroidery. This is his own clothing and represents the identity he chose to project.[3] That sets this painting in contrast to Rembrandt's portrait of the two men, who as yet remain anonymous and wear obviously theatrical costumes that Rembrandt must have come up with. Yet he captured their personalities with such skill that the painting is every bit as impressive as the formal yet powerful portraits of Dom Miguel and his servants.

30. Jasper Beckx, *Portrait of Don Miguel de Castro*, 1643. Oil on panel, 75 x 62 cm. Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst

HERE AND NOW

EPCO RUNIA

Black people play a very different role in contemporary art than in the seventeenth century. There are now black artists who reflect on their own identity, and when black people are portrayed, we know who they are. Both as artists and as subjects, black people now have agency. They are present, even more emphatically than in the past, here in Dutch society and in Dutch art.

92. Cigdem Yuksel (photo), Jörgen Tjon A Fong (concept), *Dutch Masters Revisited: Debora Nassy*, 2020. Debora: Tania Kross; Notary: Daniël Boissevain

93. Iris Kensmil, *The New Utopia Begins Here: Hermina Huiswoud*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 155 × 105 cm. Photo; Gert Jan van Rooij. Courtesy Ferdinand van Dieten office

94. Hedy Tjin, *Ilona*, 2019. Felt-tip pen printed on canvas, 75 x 89 cm.

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BLACK IN REMBRANDT'S TIME

Black people were present in seventeenth-century Holland, both in society and in art. This subject has long remained in the shadows, but wrongly so. Rembrandt and many of his contemporaries made magnificent works of art that depict black people. Those works have been collected in this book.

The biggest surprise: the later stereotypes of black people had not yet become dominant. Painters portrayed individual black models from life, with all their personal characteristics. Furthermore, black people were not always secondary figures in minor roles, but sometimes formed the main subject of the art work.

This book explores the conditions that gave rise to these remarkable works of art and the reasons the public image of black people changed from about 1660 onwards. It tells the stories of artists who aimed to capture the visual world, the impact of transatlantic slavery, and a small community of free black people in Amsterdam's Jodenbreestraat.

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