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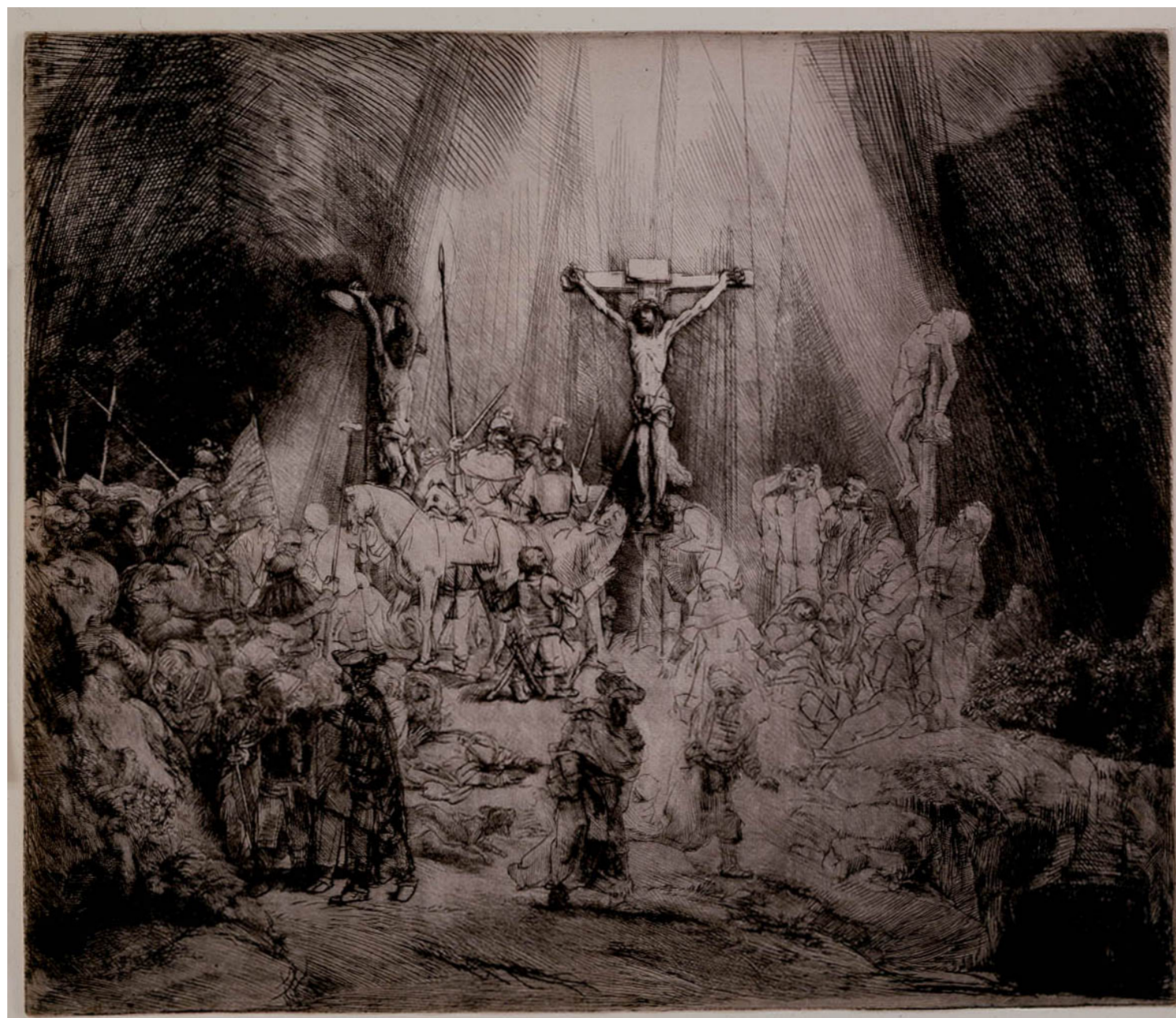
DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung

10 April 2020

Christ Crucified between Two Thieves is beyond doubt Rembrandt's magnum opus as a printmaker. Despite its large size of around 388 x 455 mm (15 x 18 inches), it is entirely executed in drypoint. And since it is a PRINT—and therefore a multiple of which today still some 100 plus impressions survive—the so-called *Three Crosses* has become one of Rembrandt's most recognizable and famous artworks.

The first "version" of the composition was completed in 1653. It exists in three different states with only minor changes to the plate between them.



After signing and dating the print in the third state, Rembrandt performed what Christopher White once aptly called "one of the most inspired defacements an artist has ever carried out on his own work." He burnished large parts of the plate, leaving the lines from the earlier version only in certain passages still recognizable. He then reworked the composition substantially, transforming it from a crowded and precisely rendered Calvary scene into a visionary interplay of darkness and light in which Christ on the cross remains the only finely modeled figure.



Everything else in this new, fourth state—from the oversized solemn rider at the left (copied after a medal by Pisanello) to the beseeching Saint John to the right—is boldly drawn in rough and powerful drypoint strokes that resemble Rembrandt's reed-pen drawings of the same period. Furthermore, the whole composition is now covered with a densely hatched web of lines that dives it into dark shadows that are only sparingly punctuated by rays of light.

This radical shift in visual conception led scholars to believe that the (undated) rework took place at a considerably later point in time. However, this hypothesis has now been convincingly disproved by the evidence of the watermarks in the papers used by Rembrandt. Erik Hinterding was able to establish with his research that many impressions of the fourth state come on paper with the same Strasbourg Bend watermark that can also be found in impressions of the first three states. Therefore, the daring and dramatic changes to the composition must have been made more or less immediately following the pull of the earlier states, in all likelihood once the plate was beginning to show the signs of wear that can be observed in poorer impressions of the third state.

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In either version, Rembrandt's print is arguable one of the most awe-inspiring depictions of Christ's death. This moment of the Passion is remembered in the Christian world today, on the Friday before Easter.

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