

C.G. BOERNER • 2021

It (Mostly) Happened at Night



Night-Scenes, Nocturnes, and Three Portraits
by Rembrandt

REMBRANDT HARMENSZ. VAN RIJN

1606 Leiden – Amsterdam 1669



etching; sheet 103 x 91 mm (4 1/6 x 3 5/8 inches)

Bartsch 19, White/Boon second state (of three);

New Hollstein 158 second state (of four)

PROVENANCE

Siegfried Barden, Hamburg (Lugt 218, with his armorial stamp Lugt 2756c)

C.G. Boerner, sale 136, November 8–9, 1921, lot 254, described as: “Das gesuchte Blatt in ausgezeichnetem, wirkungsvollem Abdruck, mit Rändchen um die Einfassung.”

private collection, Germany; thence by descent

A fine impression, showing no signs of wear; trimmed on or just inside the platemark; in excellent condition.

While Rembrandt was one of the most prolific self-portraitists of Western art, only very few of his many probing depictions of himself show him at work—and only this one shows him with his wife, Saskia van Uylenburgh. Dressed as if for a walk outside, Rembrandt wears a coat and hat but holds a drawing (or etching) stylus in his left hand (reversed from his right hand in the printing process), which he rests on a table in front of him. Behind it sits Saskia on a chair whose back is visible at the left.

This much-admired and sought-after print displays a puzzling unresolvedness: the two figures look as if they were collaged together rather than depicted as a pair situated in the same setting. Rembrandt must have started the plate with Saskia, who appears in a way that is reminiscent of the so-called “sketched plates” etched around the same time (Bartsch 365, 367, and 368, all dating to 1636–37). The overlapping linework in the place where the two figures meet reveals that his own portrait, now dominating the right half and foreground of the composition and relegating Saskia into a somewhat ill-defined middleground, was done only later. What is also unusual and intriguing is the fact that the artist does not look directly at the viewer, making this print an example of Rembrandt’s constant striving for a realism that transcends artistic conventions. He faithfully renders his own glance (likely using a mirror), as it is directed not at himself but—somewhat melancholically—at his young spouse.



The Adoration of the Shepherds: With the Lamp ca. 1654

etching; sheet 110 x 134 mm (4 3/8 x 5 1/4 inches)

Bartsch 45, White/Boon second (final) state; New Hollstein 279 third (final) state

PROVENANCE

with C.G. Boerner (our stock number in pencil on verso *zu 4853*)

private collection, Germany (acquired in March 1961); thence by descent

A posthumous but still very attractive and well-printed impression; the accidental, irregular gaps in the etched lines that distinguish impressions of the first state (and which Rembrandt himself did not attempt to correct) have now been filled in with fine cross-hatched burin lines; the sheet is in excellent condition and preserved with small margins all round.

This print is one of six etchings that show early childhood scenes from the life of Christ. They all date from around 1654 and are similar in their horizontal format and graphic style. Even in this scene, which, as the prominently featured oil lamp in the center of the composition indicates, is set in a dark interior, the linework is open and transparent. The six prints do not, however, form a proper “set” since they lack a concise narrative arc and have neither a beginning nor an end. The other scenes show *Circumcision in the Stable* (Bartsch 47), *The Flight into Egypt: Crossing a Brook* (Bartsch 55), *The Virgin and Child with the Cat and Snake* (Bartsch 63), *Christ Disputing with the Doctors* (Bartsch 64), and *Christ Returning from the Temple with His Parents* (Bartsch 60).

The “style of drawing and the proportion of the figures to the space they inhabit” is consistent throughout the series. All six prints display what Cliff Ackley describes as “the economical, suggestive shorthand combined with regular parallel shading that characterizes so many of Rembrandt’s etchings of the 1650s” (Cliff Ackley in *Rembrandt’s Journey*, exhibition catalogue, Boston/Chicago, 2003–04, p. 241).



etching, engraving, and drypoint; sheet 98 x 148 mm (3 7/8 x 5 7/8 inches)

Bartsch 55, White/Boon only state; New Hollstein 277 only state

PROVENANCE

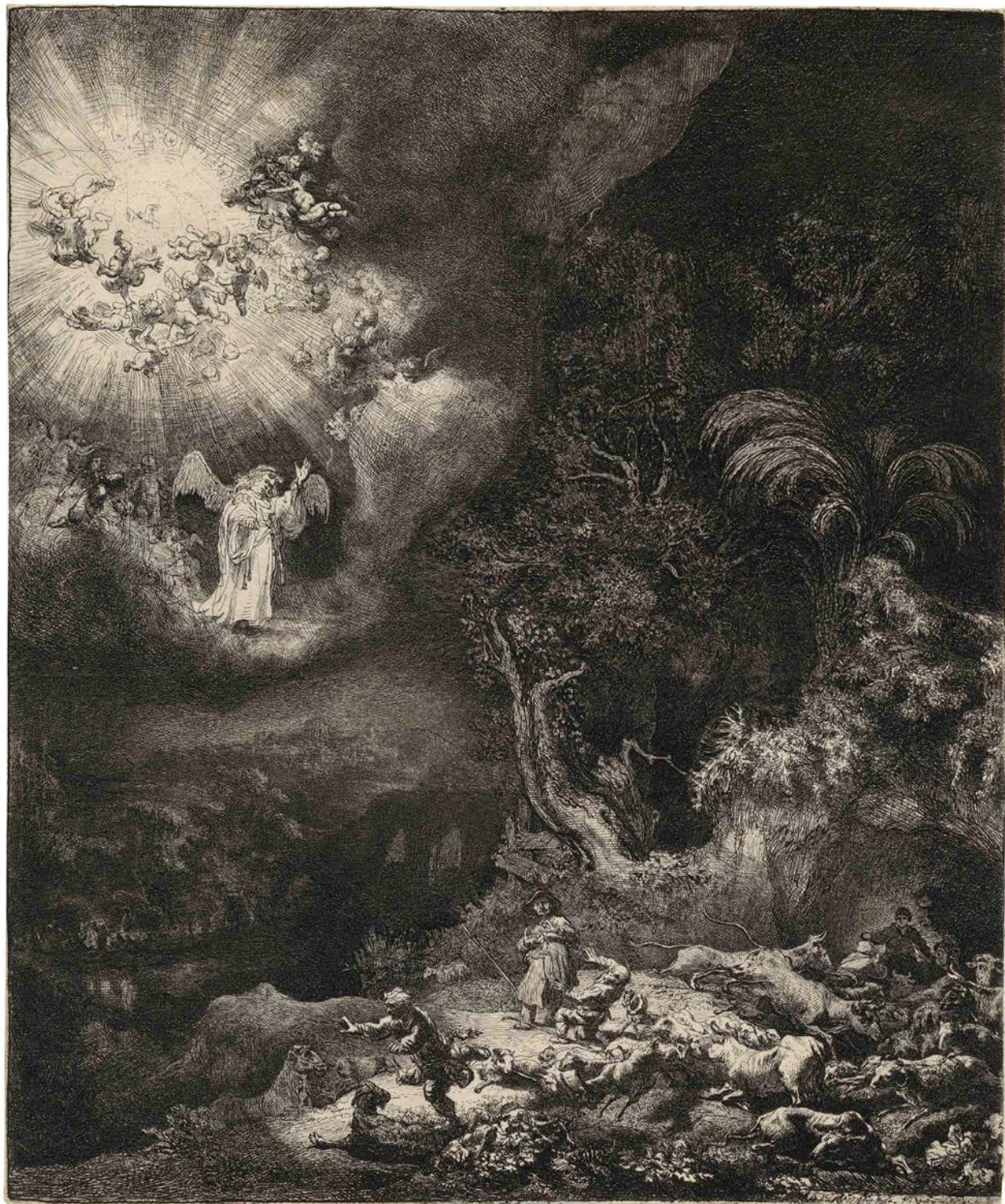
with C.G. Boerner (our stock number in pencil on verso *zu 7059*)

private collection, Germany (acquired in March 1966); thence by descent

A good but later impression; in very good condition with small margins all round.

This print is part of the same group of etchings showing childhood scenes from the life of Christ that are described in the previous catalogue entry. It is Rembrandt's last etched version of a subject he had previously treated in 1626, in one of his earliest experiments with the etching needle—*The Flight into Egypt: A Sketch* (Bartsch 54)—and to which he then repeatedly returned over a period of two decades, between 1633 and 1653 (Bartsch 52, 57, 58, 53, and 56, listed here in chronological order).

The plate for *The Flight into Egypt: Crossing a Brook* was not subjected to state changes, and the paper of our impression shows no watermark. We can therefore not say with absolute certainty when it was printed. However, while it still convincingly conveys the nighttime scene with its weary travelers, it clearly does not belong to those exceedingly rare early pulls, which are characterized by fine touches of drypoint burr and are often printed with subtle plate tone.



etching, engraving, and drypoint; sheet 262 x 220 mm (10 1/4 x 8 5/8 inches)

Bartsch 44, White/Boon third (final) state; New Hollstein 125 third state (of six)

WATERMARK

arms of Württemberg (Hinterding variant B'.a.a and B'.a.b; vol. 2, pp. 53f., vol. 3, pp. 85f. ill.)

PROVENANCE

Adam Gottlieb Thiermann, Berlin (Lugt 2434)

Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin (Lugt 1606, with their duplicate stamp Lugt 2398)

Frederik Ferdinand Hansen, Copenhagen (Lugt 2813);

his sale, C.G. Boerner, Leipzig, sale 70, May 2–4, 1901, lot 396

Siegfried Barden, Hamburg (Lugt 218)

Gilhofer & Ranschburg, Lucerne

Carl and Rose Hirschler, née Dreyfus, Haarlem (Lugt 633a), acquired in January 1926
private collection, USA

A very good impression, printing with strong contrasts and virtually no signs of wear. The paper evidence shows that the impression must have been pulled around 1634–36, immediately after the plate was finished. With thread margins, trimmed on the platemark in places.

The Angel Appearing to the Shepherds, Rembrandt's first etched nocturne, is one of the most ambitious prints of the first part of his career. It shows the influence of the so-called dark-manner prints of Jan van de Velde, Willem Akersloot, and, most notably, Hendrik [Goudt](#), who etched his prints after the nocturnal paintings by Adam Elsheimer. It “typifies Rembrandt's often frenetic, baroque compositions of the 1630s. An explosive blast of light in the night sky heralds the appearance of an angel announcing the birth of the Messiah. But the angel's admonition to ‘Be not afraid’ has come too late, for the terrified herdsmen and their flocks run for cover or drop to their knees, stunned by the unexpected and wondrous vision” (Tom Rassieur in *Rembrandt's Journey*, exhibition catalogue, Boston/Chicago, 2003–04, p. 105).

To translate the pictorial language he used in his paintings from this period into the print medium, Rembrandt deployed both burin and drypoint needle to supplement the etched composition. Furthermore, he must have created some of the tonal effects by corroding the plate directly without relying on the linear strokes of the needle or burin. “It appears that Rembrandt had already learned to create, intentionally and with a degree of control, passages of granular etched corrosion” (Rassieur, *ibid.*). The result is a dramatic interplay of darkness and light, with the latter emanating from the Holy Spirit that appears above the angel, surrounded by a multitude of tumbling cherubs.

The complex spatial relationships within the composition can only be truly appreciated in such early impressions as this one. With subsequent impressions, the part of the plate showing the background with the river and the bridge began to deteriorate, and once this happened, the plate lost all depth and became flat and dull.



The Star of the Kings: A Night Piece ca. 1651

etching, with touches of drypoint; sheet 99 x 148 mm (3 7/8 x 5 13/16 inches)

Bartsch 113, White/Boon only state; New Hollstein 263 first state (of four)

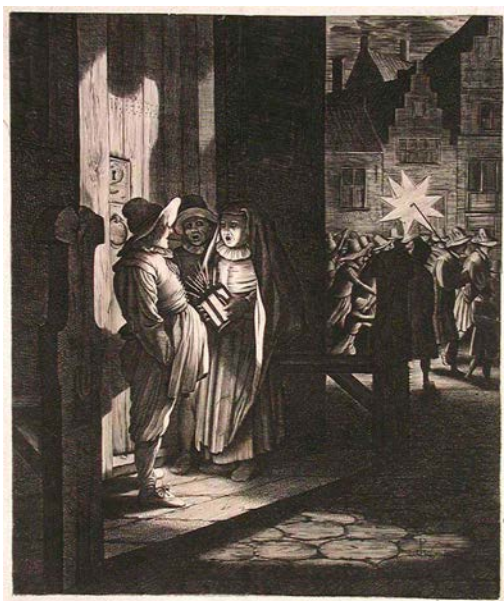
PROVENANCE

Richard H. Zinser (Lugt 5581)

private collection, Europe

A superb, richly inked impression printed on European paper, showing the touches of burr called for in the best impressions; the sheet is extremely well preserved with the paper margins serving as a welcome frame that makes the overall darkness of the scene stand out even more.

The Christian church of the West celebrates January 6 as the feast of the Epiphany, commemorating the day when the three Magi, Caspar, Melchior, and Bathasar, arrived in Bethlehem to worship the newborn Christ Child. On the evening of this feast day, children in Europe have for centuries walked in the streets singing and carrying lanterns in the shape of a star—the King’s star. According to the Gospel of Matthew (2:1–12), it was the appearance of an unusually bright light in the eastern sky that had guided the Magi to Bethlehem. These processions of the *Sternsinger*, as they are called in Germany, are still a tradition in many countries.



Jan van de Velde depicted these *Star Singers* in a print from 1630, made after a design by Pieter Molijn. His print might have served as an inspiration for this etching made by Rembrandt about two decades later.

As he so often did, Rembrandt completely reinvented the scene and pushed the envelope to see how far he could go in creating darkness in print. The surface of the plate is covered by a dense web of etched lines, to which he added finishing touches in drypoint and probably some burin work. As a result, the viewer’s eyes literally have to adapt to the composition, as if entering a dark room. Only then can one begin to make out some of the surrounding figures. Nonetheless, only those closest to the light ultimately become

distinguishable. The star-shaped lantern sets the image aglow, and the richer the printing is, the more pronounced the effect. In such a superb impression as this one, the background remains veiled in etched darkness and the whiteness of the paper comes through as the only true source of light—proving Rembrandt as the true master of the printed “night piece.”



etching and drypoint; sheet 213 x 163 mm (8 3/8 x 6 7/16 inches)

Bartsch 83, White/Boon only state; New Hollstein 286 first state (of four)

WATERMARK

foolscap with five-pointed collar (Hinterding variant G-b-a; vol. 2, p. 123, vol. 3, p. 214 ill.)

PROVENANCE

P. & D. Colnaghi & Co., London (their stock no. in pencil verso *C.31001*)

The Montclair Art Museum, Montclair, New Jersey;

de-accessioned, Christies, New York, May 13, 1997, lot 237 (acquired by C.G. Boerner)

private collection, Germany (acquired in 1997); thence by descent

A very fine impression with patches of burr in the central group of figures; in impeccable, untreated condition with small margins all round.

This print belongs to a group of four vertical prints of identical size that all show significant events from the life of Christ. The others are *The Presentation in the Temple (in the dark manner)* (Bartsch 50), *The Entombment* (Bartsch 86), and *Christ at Emmaus* (Bartsch 87). Our print as well as *Christ at Emmaus* are dated 1654; the other two are, to quote Cliff Ackley, so “consistent in style and execution” that they “can securely be assigned the same date.” Ackley perfectly characterizes “the symbolic dialogue of darkness and light [that] plays the central expressive role” in this set of images. “The movement and gesture of the participants are carefully calculated but are more restrained and contained than the theatrical gesticulations of the actors in the etched Biblical narratives of the 1630s.” As in earlier religious prints, Rembrandt was clearly “thinking serially,” even though he never followed that serial impulse “to a conventional conclusion”—meaning he never issued any of those groups of prints as numbered sets with a title-page the way many contemporary printmakers in the Netherlands and elsewhere did (all quotes from Cliff Ackley in *Rembrandt’s Journey*, exhibition catalogue, Boston/Chicago, 2003–04, p. 232).

To distinguish it from Rembrandt’s other two printed depictions of the scene (Bartsch 81 and 82), this print is known as *The Descent from the Cross by Torchlight*. Ironically, though, for a night scene, what stands out is *not* the torch (which can be made out at the top left of the image in front of the sheet wound around the top of the cross to support Christ’s dead body) but the hand reaching out of the darkness closer to the center of the composition. This hand belongs to a man who is prepared to help with the lowering of the corpse but whom Rembrandt depicts shrouded in darkness.

Although Rembrandt also printed the plate on off-white oriental papers (much sought-after by collectors), in this specific instance it is the whiteness of the European paper that, at least in our opinion, can best bring forward the dramatic contrast between the artificial light and the darkness that surrounds it—not unlike the other, slightly earlier night scene of *The Star of the Kings* discussed above.



The Strolling Musicians ca. 1635

etching; sheet 147 x 118 mm (5 3/4 x 4 5/8 inches)

Bartsch 119, White/Boon first state (of two); New Hollstein 141 first state (of three)

PROVENANCE

private collection, Germany; thence by descent

A fine, early impression; in excellent condition with small albeit slightly irregular margins all round.

In the inventory of the Amsterdam print publisher Clement de Jonghe, this print is described as “Speelders an de deur” (players at the door). Judging from the way the light comes from within the house and shines on the two musicians, whereas the faces of the parents holding their small child in the door are veiled in darkness, this is also a night scene. It thereby makes a fitting (and *light*-hearted) conclusion to the group in our *Kleine Auswahl*. We can see an old, bearded hurdy-gurdy player, who is accompanied by a boy with a bagpipe as well as a small dog. Rembrandt was clearly fascinated by the figure of the old hurdy-gurdy player, as he made it the subject of no fewer than three drawings (Benesch 745, 749, and 750) and three more etchings: *The Hurdy-Gurdy Player Followed by Children: “The Schoolmaster”* (Bartsch 128), *A Standing Hurdy-Gurdy Player: “Polander Standing with Arms Folded”* (Bartsch 140), and *A Blind Hurdy-Gurdy Player and Family Receiving Alms* (Bartsch 176).

The mundane subject was derived from the lower ranks of everyday life and is presented here in a truly wonderful impression. There are no signs of wear in the darkly shaded areas, and the overall tonal values are well balanced. In later and posthumous impressions, the most-deeply etched outlines of the figures stand in stark contrast to the by then already faded, finer hatchings. No such deterioration of the plate is evident here.



etching; sheet 86 x 70 mm (3 3/8 x 2 3/4 inches)

Bartsch 311, White/Boon only state; New Hollstein 73 only state

PROVENANCE

private collection, Germany; thence by descent

A very fine, early impression, with the burry smudge to the right of the sitter's nose clearly noticeable and only the faintest trace of wear in the shadow under the rim of the hat; in superb, untreated condition, merely showing two minute rust spots caused by metal inclusions in the paper.

Along with the so-called *Four Illustrations for a Spanish Book*, the *Portrait of Ephraim Bonus*, *The Great Jewish Bride*, and others, this print belongs to the often-discussed group of works by Rembrandt with more or less explicitly Jewish themes or subjects. Here, however, the link is tenuous; it is based on an 1755 sale catalogue that describes the etching, listed in a group of other small prints, as “Een Jooden Doctor met een toegeknoopten Rok, hebbende een Hoed op en een Kraag om” (A Jewish doctor with a buttoned coat having a hat on and a ruff). Since no name was ever put forward for this “Jewish doctor,” the Dutch scholar I. H. van Eeghen more recently identified the sitter as the Samuel Smijters (d. 1644), based on an entry in Clement de Jonghe's 1679 inventory that reads “conterf. van Smijters.” Smijters was a publisher, bookseller, and collector who is documented as a buyer in some of the same sales in which Rembrandt also participated. Since he also bought copper plates, he might also have been active as a print dealer. Erik Hinterding, who presents those various hypotheses in his catalogue of the Lugt collection, remarks on their lack of any “concrete proof” (Erik Hinterding, *Rembrandt Etchings from the Frits Lugt Collection*, Paris 2008, vol. 1, pp. 553f.).

Hinterding also discusses the monogram and date visible at the upper left and the various ways the monogram has been read in the past—as either “RHL,” “RL,” or “Rt”—which affects the deciphering of the date as either 1630 or 1638. He ultimately settles on “RL” or “Rt,” which allows for a date of 1638. This date is ultimately more likely than 1630, given the sophistication of the small yet imposing image. Rembrandt adds gravitas by adopting a slightly lower, *di sotto in sù* viewpoint. Accordingly, the sitter looks slightly downward. He introduces another layer of complexity in the man's somewhat formal get-up, which is counterbalanced by the casualness of his depiction with his mouth open and teeth showing. Even if the sitter remains unknown, Rembrandt has created a masterful study of immediacy.

The print is uncommon, and it is described by Nowell-Usticke as “a very rare small portrait.” This makes such a fine impression in superb, untreated condition as the one here all the more special.

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