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C.G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

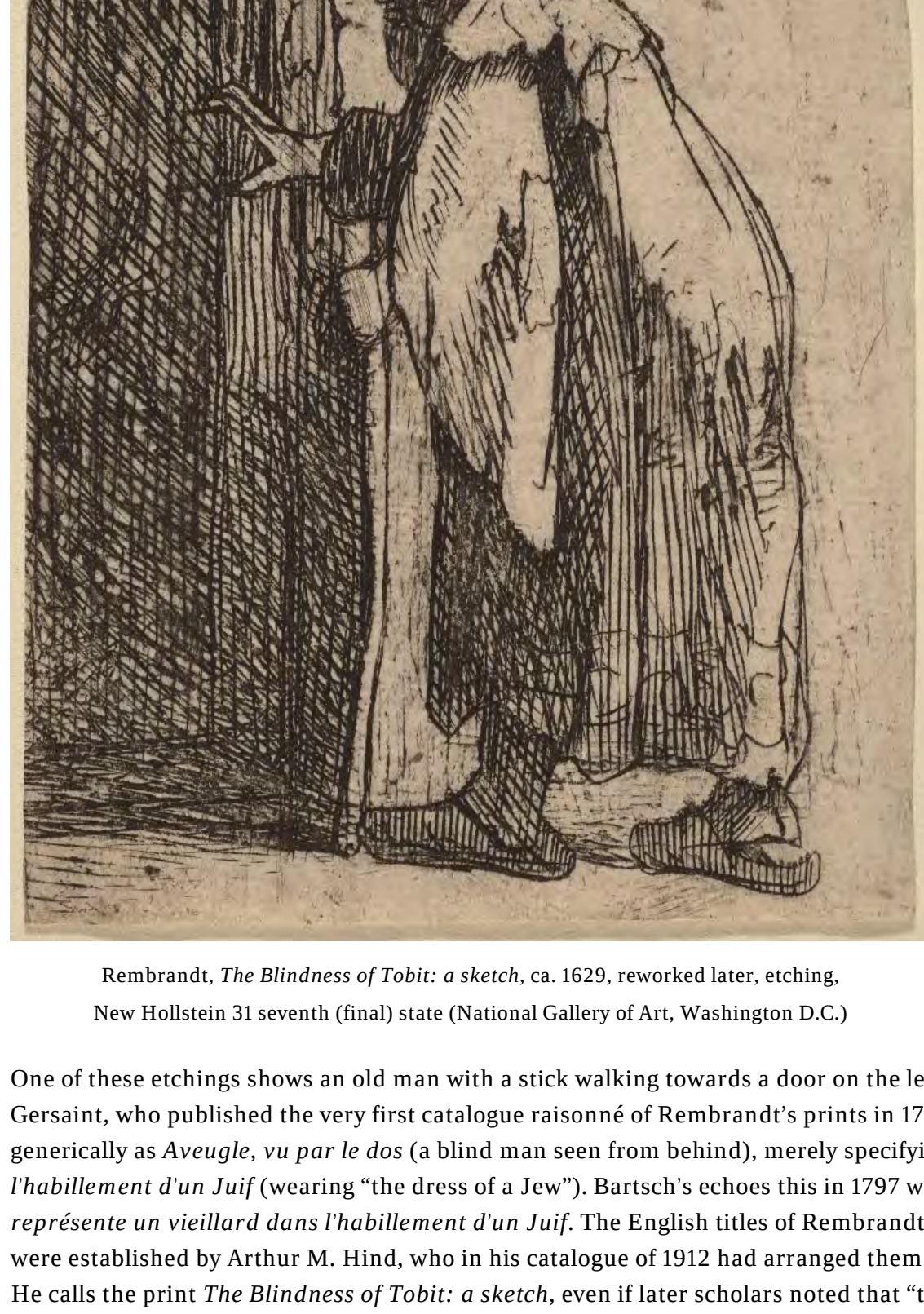
Distraction / Abwechslung

6 October 2026

By the end of the 1620s, the young Rembrandt (1606–1669) had begun to experiment with printmaking. His first attempts in the medium were ambitious but technically limited. They were quickly abandoned, and prints like his *St. Jerome kneeling: large plates* have hence only survived in two impressions.



Yet Rembrandt did not give up. Instead, he retreated to smaller plates, using his mother, himself, and the figures of old beggars as subjects to further study and tenaciously explore the technique of etching. A consummate painter and draftsman, he never wanted to follow in the footsteps of, say, his Dutch ancestor Hendrick Goltzius (1558–1617) whose brilliant, intensely controlled webs of swelling and tapering lines had defined Mannerist printmaking in the North. Rembrandt's early prints are loose sketches that resemble, more than anything else, drawings, drawn not on paper but scratched into the waxy ground used to cover the copper plate, to be then exposed to a strong acid or mordant that will etch those lines into the metal.

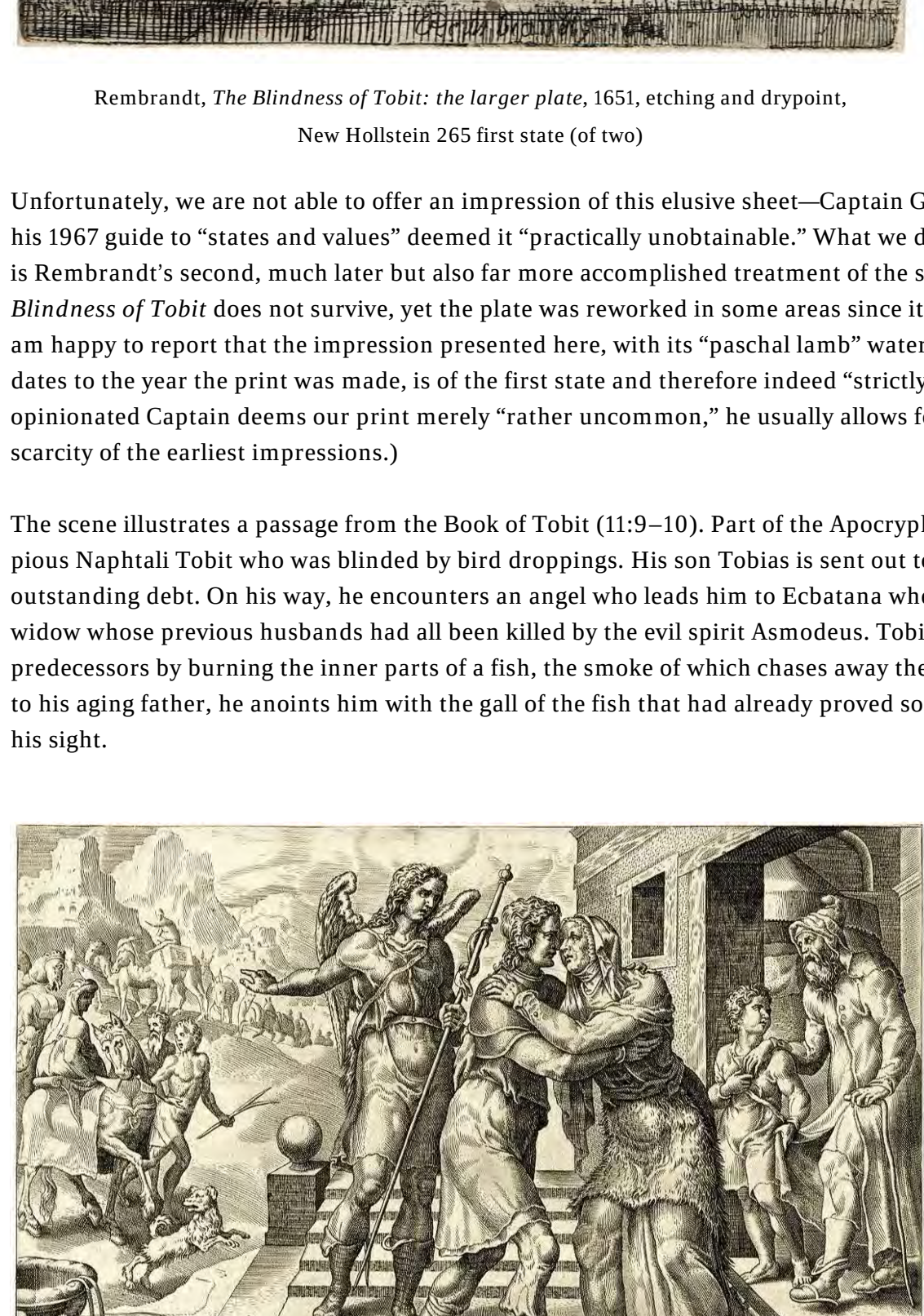


One of these etchings shows an old man with a stick walking towards a door on the left. Edme-François Gersaint, who published the very first catalogue raisonné of Rembrandt's prints in 1751, described it generically as *Aveugle, vu par le dos* (a blind man seen from behind), merely specifying that he is *dans l'habillement d'un Juif* (wearing “the dress of a Jew”). Bartsch's echoes this in 1797 when he writes: *Il représente un vieillard dans l'habillement d'un Juif*. The English titles of Rembrandt's prints still used today were established by Arthur M. Hind, who in his catalogue of 1912 had arranged them in chronological order. He calls the print *The Blindness of Tobit: a sketch*, even if later scholars noted that “there are no iconographic features that point to the biblical story” (Reiner Hausscherr, 1965). There is indeed nothing in the image to suggest Tobit; even hardly anything that points to the man being blind: he does not stumble and finds the door without difficulty. Only the outstretched right hand with which he feels his way forward into the dark doorway seems to hint at his impairment.

Hind reminded his readers that “some critics,” among them Woldemar von Seidlitz in 1895, had regarded the print “as a pupil's imitation of the larger composition.” Forty years later, Ludwig Münz proposed Johannes van Vliet as its creator. The print would therefore have undoubtedly made a useful example for Nadine Orenstein when she addressed attribution questions for Rembrandt's prints as part of the 1995 show *Rembrandt/Not Rembrandt in The Metropolitan Museum of Art: Aspects of Connoisseurship*. An endlessly fascinating topic when it comes to the artist's paintings and drawings, attribution is far less of a concern when it comes to Rembrandt's prints, since for most of them there is now widespread agreement among scholars as to their authorship. However, as the show's title makes clear, the focus was on the Met's own holdings, and this little print is in fact extremely rare. Counting all the impressions of the seven different states described in the most recent catalogue, published in the *New Hollstein* series in 2013, the total number comes to no more than 21 impressions, of which the one illustrated above is the only one in the United States.



Erik Hinterding and Jaco Rutgers, the authors of those magisterial *Hollstein* tomes, do accept Rembrandt as the print's creator, yet believe that only the first state is entirely the work of the master, ascribing the alterations in all consecutive states to different later hands, making the sole impression of the first state in Amsterdam's Rijksprentenkabinet a veritable *Unikum*.



Unfortunately, we are not able to offer an impression of this elusive sheet—Captain Gordon Nowell-Usticke in his 1967 guide to “states and values” deemed it “practically unobtainable.” What we do have for sale, however, is Rembrandt's second, much later but also far more accomplished treatment of the subject. The plate for *The Blindness of Tobit* does not survive, yet the plate was reworked in some areas since it is known in two states. I am happy to report that the impression presented here, with its “paschal lamb” watermark, which Hinterding dates to the year the print was made, is of the first state and therefore indeed “strictly lifetime.” (While the opinionated Captain deems our print merely “rather uncommon,” he usually allows for a somewhat greater scarcity of the earliest impressions.)

The scene illustrates a passage from the Book of Tobit (11:9–10). Part of the Apocrypha, it tells the story of the pious Naphtali Tobit who was blinded by bird droppings. His son Tobias is sent out to collect some outstanding debt. On his way, he encounters an angel who leads him to Ecbatana where he marries a virgin-widow whose previous husbands had all been killed by the evil spirit Asmodeus. Tobias escapes the fate of his predecessors by burning the inner parts of a fish, the smoke of which chases away the spirit. When he returns to his aging father, he anoints him with the gall of the fish that had already proved so useful, and Tobit regains his sight.



The blind old man strides forward, stretching out his arm, yet it is clear that he is heading into the wrong direction. That Tobit will miss the doorway and hit the door instead has never been shown in this way, and as so often when Rembrandt deviates in his interpretations of a biblical scene from the standard iconographic tradition, his inspiration came from his close reading of the Bible. Throughout the Middle Ages, the Latin *Vulgate* was the most commonly used Bible text. It merely refers to Tobit's tripping. In the King James Bible of 1611, the door is mentioned but only to denote the direction in which Tobit is heading: “Tobit also went forth toward the doore, and stumbled.” In 1618–19, a Dutch translation known as the *Statenbijbel* was completed and soon became the canonical biblical text for the Netherlands. Here, the verse reads: *En Tobias kwam uit naar de deur en stiet zich daaraan* (11:10). As in the print, it is *de deur* (the door) that Tobit is about to bump into. [What makes this verbatim quote slightly confusing is the fact that in many of the older texts (incl. the Latin *Vulgate*), both father and son are called Tobias.]

By taking this single sentence as his starting point and expanding it with acute attention to the smallest details (the knocked-over spinning wheel, the dog), Rembrandt transformed the scene into a poignant depiction of human frailty, thereby revealing, even in a relatively modest print such as this, the profound empathy and humanity that lie at the heart of all his art.

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PS: I confess that bringing up empathy and humanity in this day and age evokes a pang of wistfulness, even a certain eeriness, not least in a country that elected—twice—a presidential candidate who, at one of his campaign rallies, could be seen mimicking and mocking a reporter with a physical disability. Let's hope, therefore, that Rembrandt's humane art will endure when our era's tinsel-like sheen has long since faded into oblivion.

Rembrandt, The Blindness of Tobit: the larger plate

