Rembrandt van Rijn

The Night Watch

1642 (Amsterdam, Rijkmuseum)
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1. General Informations

The Nightwatch is probably the most famous and most common known painting by Rembrandt, painted in 1642. It was composed for the Kloveniersdoelen in Amsterdam in the Groote Zaal, where it should represent the Shooting Company of Frans Banning Cocq. The painting is renowned for three elements: its colossal size (363 x 437 cm), the effective use of light and shadow (chiaroscuro), and the perception of motion in what would have been, traditionally, a static military portrait.

2. Rembrandts Biography

The famous Dutch painter Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn was born at the 15th of July 1606 in the Dutch village of Leyden. It is known that he first visited a Latin school afterwards he matriculated at the University of Leiden. But soon after the Beginning of his studies he canceled his university career and received training as a painter, first 3 years by Jakob van Swanenburgh in his hometown Leiden and then half a year by Pieter Lastman in Amsterdam. At the age of 19 he begun to work independently and after the death of his father in 1630 he moved permanently to Amsterdam. In the same year he painted one of his most famous works of his oeuvre, the Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp. In the following year he got engaged with the 22-year-old Saskia van Uylenburgh, cousin of the art trader Hendrick van Uylenburgh and one year later, in 1634, they got married. In 1640 his mother died and one year later his beloved wife and subject of many of his paintings Saskia died, leaving him in charge for their just nearly one year old son Titus. Titus was the only surviving child of Rembrandt, the other two children whom Saskia gave birth, died shortly after their birth. In these difficult times he painted the Night Watch, today maybe his most popular work. In 1645 he began an open relationship with the nanny of Titus, Hendrickje Stoffels. Their relationship was not accepted by the society of the Dutch golden age because they were not married. Nine years after their first acquaintance Hendrickje gave birth to their daughter Cornelia. In the mean time Rembrandt lived beyond

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1 Great Hall
2 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Night_Watch_(painting)
his means, buying art (including bidding up his own work), prints (often used in his paintings), and rarities, which probably caused a court arrangement to avoid his bankruptcy in 1656, by selling most of his paintings and large collection of antiquities. In 1662 Hendrickje died and six years later his son Titus died, just after getting married to Magdalena van Loo. One year later, in October 1669 Rembrandt died in Amsterdam.

3. Name Provinience – “Nightwatch”

First the painting was known as Company of Captain Frans Banning Cocq and Lieutenant Willem van Ruytenhurch, after the people who were depicted in the painting and their profession. But not until the late 18th Century it was started to called Night Watch. As a matter of fact, both, Night and Watch is wrong. The guards in the painting were not really on the Watch, it was not necessary to defend Amsterdam anymore at the time the painting was made. These meetings of the guardians had more in common as social and sports meetings. Also the word Night is not correct. When the critics and the public first noticed this masterpiece, it becomes darkened by dirt and layers of varnish. In the end it really looked dark and nobody could have told if the significant illumination was made by the sun or by the moon, but obviously they guessed the plot in the painting would take action in the night. Not until the World War II the painting was restored and freed from the dark layers of varnish. Soon after the restoration journalists tried to change the name into the “Day Watch” but this try failed, it was just too long known as the “Night Watch” to be called anything else.

Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Shooting Company of Frans Banning Cook (The Night Watch)*, 363 cm × 437 cm, oil on canvas, 1642, Rijkmuseum, Amsterdam.

4. **Description of the picture**

The background is filled with many armed men, who are standing in front of a column row. These men can be identified as Guild members of the Klovenierdoelen, an Amsterdamer Shooting Company, established in 1520. A general movement from the back to the front can be noticed, they are moving away from the dark gateway, right into the light. The two men in the front are the main figure group in the painting and actually the leaders of this Shooting Club. First of all there is Frans Banning Cocq, Lord of Pumerlandt and captain of the Kloveniersdoelen, who holds his hand commanding forwards. He is dressed in dark violet, with a red sharp over his clothes and with, at this time, popular white lace collar. His whole appearance is more conservative and civil and less military. Contrary to this is the appearance of the man next to him, the officer Willem van Ruytenburg, Lord of Vlaerdingen. In opposition to the more civil clothed captain, he appears bright and with magnificent clothing,
dressed in military clothes in bright yellow with a lace collar of iron and a white sharp. In those days clothing like this was common at the French court and could be understood as a statement of sympathizing with the House of Orange-Nassau, and as a matter of fact, a statement against the Spanish occupation. Both men are moving right to the viewer.

Another group of figures, which is conspicuous, is located on the left side behind the captain and the officer. This group consists of two girls, and the most conspicuous thing about this group is the bright lightning around them. Only the girl in the front is completely visible, with her face turned directly to the main group. She is dressed in a yellow dress and carries a white chicken at her belt. At the left, the girls are partly covered by a soldier, dressed in red, who stands in front of them and uploads his gun. Another man, who is on the same level, stands behind the captain and the officer, fires at this very moment, which the work depicts, his gun.

At the right corner of the painting you can recognize a drummer who is nearly cut off. Behind him is a Sergeant, who commands his troops and moves them to the centre of the painting. Right at the left, also nearly cut off from the observers view, is a second sergeant with helmet and halberd, who sits on a balustrade and looks straight to the captain, observing the discussion between him and the officer. In front of him a little boy is running out of the painting and behind him are more soldiers discussing, taking commands, loading up guns and moving to the front, equally as on the left side. Above the whole scenery stands another sergeant who flies the flag. Around him his companions step out of the gateway.

4.1. Identities in the Painting – The Men of the Shooting Company of Frans Banning Cocq

In the case of The Night Watch, the clients, the people who ordered the painting and the persons who are depicted in it, are identically. The painting is said to be commissioned by the captain of the civil guard and 17 other members of his Kloveniers⁴.

As a matter of fact, the eighteen names appear on a shield in the background, located in the center right, which was added later in 1715 by an unknown painter. Furthermore it was not known, which name belongs to which figure. But after years of research in archives and

⁴ Civil military guards
inventories of the state, Dutch Historian Bas Dudok van Heel has now finally linked each name to a depicted figure.\(^5\)

Rembrandt’s technique was ahead of one’s time other static portraits. But actually most of the guardsmen could have foreseen how the painting would look like, once Rembrandt was chosen for it, because most of them must have been familiar with Rembrandt’s Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp a decade earlier. This work from 1632 is also a group portrait with a similar composition. It is also known that for group portraits in that time, the persons who were in a higher position paid more and would therefore be depicted in full size and reckonable. Other group members of not equal prominence, who paid less, were therefore depicted only partial, but nevertheless recognizable.

5. The Composition

In his painting, Rembrandt depicts first of all an action, a plot. He portrays exactly the moment, in which the action starts. The captain gives orders to the officer, which he will pass on to the soldiers. Other members of the company are already waiting for the orders to be executed, which can be seen for example by the sergeant on the left, who expectantly is observing the captain and the officer, and also by other soldiers in the background, who are keeping their firearms ready. It is an “atmosphere of departure and rearranging.”\(^6\) At the expense of the single portrays, the plot becomes the centre of attention, in which the soldiers are depicted in an “inner unit.”\(^7\) The single person exists in a higher unit, in which everyone can act autonomous, and decide for themselves, but everything happens in relation to an overall context. Some men are only depicted darkened or partly, depending on which role they play in the plot. The whole painting is a composition of movement that makes the painting so vivid. The men of the shooting company come together to muster and to follow their sergeants and officers to the front. In front of the sergeant on the left side soldiers’ step out to the front, behind him another sergeant with a flag comes along with his troop out of the gateway. All in all a general movement forward can be noticed.

Also noticeable are the parallel lines that appear quite often in the painting. For example the parallel lines that the sarge of the bright officer on the right side of the painting forms together with the shotgun that the soldier loads and the spike of another sergeant above, or on the left

\(^5\) http://www.artdaily.com/index.asp?int_sec=11&int_new=29632&int_modo=2#.UMnyBm-ZS8A
side, where the stab of the captain, the shotgun of the red soldier and the flag staff of the sergeant are diagonal parallel to each other.

5.1. The Lightning

In the Night Watch appears a powerful lightning composition that uses strong contrast between dark and bright, also known as chiaroscuro. This contrast lightning forms the human bodies and supports the vivid moments. Also the Lightning is a way to identify the most important figures of the painting, first of all the leaders of the troop, the Captain and the officer at the front. Another ray of light illuminates the girl and touches the red soldier and a group of soldiers in the back, everything else is shown in a warm half shade.

Rembrandts realistic impression is based on little details, like the using of shadows. For example and most remarkable is the shadow from the captains hand on the officers coat. It suggests that the sun is on the left angle with about 45 degree. Even if the shadow of the captain’s leg indicates a different angle, the painting does not lose his credibility. It just proofs that Rembrandt painted and composed the work indoors, and it furthermore opened up the possibility of regulating and manipulating the light to create a specific atmosphere.
6. Technique

Rembrandt’s brush stroke is in general in the Night Watch quite vast and generous. The main characters are depicted more detailed, with thick and pastose brushwork, which for example the embroideries at the yellow coat of the officer show. Other less important figures are painted more freely and appear only in a half shade, for example the nearly hidden girl behind the illuminated girl or many of the soldiers in the background. In contrary to his later works, were he becomes even more freer in his technique and used to apply the paint with a palette knife or even with his fingers, which was often depicted by the critics as a kind of laxness, the Night Watch can be considered as painted by a more conventional technique.¹

6.1. “Rembrandt Brown”

A century after Rembrandt’s death, some of his paintings got a makeover: restorers’ added layer of mostly toned varnish, at first to protect the painting from dirt, but also to make the strokes and colors blend. These bold brushes, with which he performed his relatively free technique, had disturbed certain critics and was mostly seen as laxness in Rembrandt’s time. By applying layer upon layer of toned varnish, which was frequently tinted, the paintings gotten darker and browner. Critics than put Rembrandt to be in charge of coloring kind of monochrome and just working with a little palette of colors. But in the past generation Rembrandts works were cleaned, including the Night Watch, and are now viewed in nearly their original state.

7. Original destination and provenance

The original destination of the painting was the banquet hall of the Amsterdam Shooting Club. Eighteen members of this rifle club were also the clients which commissioned the painting. Formerly it was located with other so called rifle club paintings in the Doelen Saal, where these paintings covered up a whole wall. ² But the painting was moved 1715 from his initial place to another, smaller hall at the town hall. Therefore the painting was reduced, at both sides and at the top, with which the main figure group, the captain and the officer, were belatedly placed in the middle of the painting. In the original condition both main figures of the painting were not

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¹ [http://www.rembrandtpainting.net/rembrandt's_night_watch.htm](http://www.rembrandtpainting.net/rembrandt's_night_watch.htm)
² After: Werkmonographien zur bildenden Kunst, publisher Carl Georg Heise Nr. 20 p.21.
placed in the middle, rather they were moving to it. It is possible to identify these circumstances on the basis of an old copy from the painter Gerrit Lundens. This painting from the 17th century depicts the works in his original state. There is shown that at the left side next to the sergeant, another two figures are represented and besides, the drummer is portrayed nearly in his full size and the arch of the entrance gate is shown completely. 10 Back in the days when Napoleon occupied the Netherlands, the city hall became is new residence in the country. The magistrates moved the famous work to the Tripenhuis, the house of the family Trip. Shortly thereafter Napoleon ordered the painting back to his residence, but after the occupation has ended, the painting was moved back to the Tripenhuis again, which had now become the Dutch Academy of Sciences.

In 1885 it was moved again, to his permanent place of residence, the new Rijksmuseum. But the permanent residence was not so permanent after all. Around fifty years later at 1939, just before the outbreak of the Second World War the painting was moved again. The canvas was removed from its frame and rolled around a cylinder. It was then stored in a castle in Medemblik, in the north of Amsterdam. After the war was over, the canvas returned to the Rijkmuseum again, where it was unrolled, restored and reinstalled.

On December 11, 2003, The Night Watch was transferred to a temporary location, due to a major refurbishment of the Rijkmuseum. The painting was detached from its frame, wrapped in stain-free paper, put into a wooden frame which was put into two sleeves. Then it was driven to its new destination and hoisted up. During the refurbishment, The Night Watch can be seen in its temporary location in the Philipspleugel of the Rijksmuseum. The refurbishment is expected to finish in April 2013, and the painting will be returned to its original place in the Nachtwachtzaal 11

8. Vandalism

More as other paintings, the Night Watch, based on its fame, has to suffer from a history of vandalism. The first attack against the Night Watch happened in 1911, when an unemployed ship’s cook went with a knife at the painting. There is barely an explanation for his attack as it seems that he had no reason for his act of violence. Fortunately the Night Watch was still covered with a layer of hardened varnish (cf. 6.1. Rembrandt Brown), therefore the attacker was unable to cut through it.

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11 Dutch: „Room oft he Night Watch”
Another Attack happened in 1975, when the unemployed teacher, Wilhelms de Rijk, attacked the painting, also with a knife. He unfortunately succeeded in his attempt to cut through the painting and just after time consuming restorations the painting was again in a show able condition. But it never recovered wholly and till date some traces of the attack are left on it.

The last attack to this date happened in 1990, when a mental-ill sprayed a bottle of sulphuric acid over the painting. Thanks to the presents of mind of the guards, who quickly sprayed water upon the painting and to the layer of varnish, which was installed after the paintings second attack, the Night Watch could be restored fully.

9. Works influenced by the Night Watch

The work has inspired many different works, from other art work to music and films. First of all, it has inspired, or was the reason for other art works, like the full sized replica of it, which is displayed by the Canajoharie Library & Art Gallery, in Canajoharie, New York. It was donated to the library in the early 20th century by the library's founder, Bartlett Arkell. Another example therefore is the group of sculptures, which turned the Night Watch in 3D. These bronze sculptures represent the members of the Night Watch, as they are depicted in the painting. The sculpture was exposed from 2006-2009 in Rembrandtplein, Amsterdam.

It has not only inspired art work, it also inspired musicians, classical as well rock musicians. An example for a classical work inspired by the painting is the second movement of Gustav Mahlers 7th Symphony. An example for traditional rock is given by King Crimsons The Night Watch. The Night Watch was also an inspiration for a Dutch musical project called Ayreon, especially the scene "The Shooting Company of Captain Frans B. Cocq" from Universal Migrator Part 1: The Dream Sequencer. The project combines genres like folk, classical and electronic music.

It has also inspired some films, in which more or less the Painting is mentioned, stolen or even the main subject of the movie. The first movie in which the Night Watch plays an important role is Alexander Kordas biographical Film Rembrandt from 1936. It depicts the painting, shown in error in its truncated form, as a failure at its completion, perceived as lampooning its outraged subjects.
In Jean-Luc Godard's 1982 film, *Passion, The Night Watch* is reenacted with live actors in an opening shot. Godard explicitly compares his film to Rembrandt's painting, describing them both as "full of holes and badly-filled spaces." He instructs the viewer not to focus on the overall composition, but to approach his film as one would a Rembrandt and "focus on the faces."

Another Movie is *Night Watch*, in this film from 1995 the famous painting got stolen. Also *The Night Watch* is a major plot device of a 2007 film by director Peter Greenaway. In this film, called *Nightwatching*, the film posits a conspiracy within the musketeer regiment of Frans Banning Cocq and Willem van Ruytenburch, and suggests that Rembrandt may have immortalized a conspiracy theory, using subtle allegory in his group portrait of the regiment and subverting what was to have been a highly prestigious commission for both painter and subject. In the following year Greenway produced another Film about this topic, which can be seen as a prequel or follow-on of the previous. *Rembrandt J’Accuse* covers the same ideas, using detailed analysis of the compositional elements in the painting. In this Greenway describes *The Night Watch* as the fourth most famous painting in the Western world, after the Mona Lisa, the Last Supper and the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.¹²

## 10. The Myth beyond the Night Watch

There exists a persistent theory behind the Night Watch that developed ca. a century after the painting was made. It consists of the assumption that the Night Watch causes Rembrandt bankruptcy, because it was too modern in its vivid composition and that the members of the Shooting Company did not like it, because they were not depicted in a sufficient way.

The truth of the matter is that Rembrandt did not receive any critics during his lifetime. The members of the shooting company all paid, there was a reproduction made from the painter Gerrit Lundens and the Captain Frans Banning Cocq even had a smaller watercolor replica made for his own personal album. All that indicates the popularity of the work. It was never hidden away, as another rumor went around; it was only moved from the Kloveniersdoelen to the town hall, because of which it, unfortunately, had to be modified, *(cf. 7. Original destination)* nor it made an abrupt end between Rembrandt and his patronages. That proofs further commissions made by the prince of Orange, which consists of two smaller works for 2400 guilders. ¹³ It is more likely that this Myth beyond the Night Watch had come up in the

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¹³ For the Night Watch he received 1600 guilders
Age of Romanticism, where the artist was perceived as a suffering lonesome individual. The real reasons for his decline had in fact nothing to do with the Night Watch, rather than with the change of taste in the Dutch art scene. During the 1640s wealthy citizens developed a fondness for “showiness and elegance”14 and Rembrandts chiaroscuro-esque style was simply to dark for their taste. The clients demanded brighter paintings in the style of the Flemish portraitist Anthon van Dyck.

11. Resume

All in all it can be said that the Night Watch is one extraordinary work of art, especially for its time in the midst of the 17th century. With vivid composition it anticipates opportunities, which are not established until the next couple of decades. Furthermore now the myth beyond the Night Watch can be falsified. The painting may be one of his last great successes, but it is neither because of its content nor of unhappy clients, rather of a change in the Dutch art scene. It can be said to be a great fortunate, that the painting is still preserved after many attacks against it, because it has still such a great influence at art and life in our days.

Concluding with the words of Samuel van Hoogstraten, one of Rembrandts most known pupil, who may have foreseen the lasting influence the painting has on the world:

“It is not enough for a painter to place his portraits next to one another in a row, as one can see all too often here in Holland in the militia halls[...] Rembrandt has observed this rule very well in his piece for the militia hall in Amsterdam, although many feel too well, making more work of the large picture of his choice than the particular portions he was commissioned to execute. Nevertheless, the same work, no matter how much it deserves criticism, will outlast all its competitors, in my opinion, being so painterly in thought, so dashing in arrangement, and so powerful, that in the opinion of some, all the other pieces in the hall stand beside it like playing cards [...]”15

14 http://www.rembrandtpainting.net/rembrandt's_night_watch.htm
15 Samuel van Hoogstraten, Inleyding tot de Hooge Schoole der Schilderkonst (Amsterdam: 1672), p 176.
12. Literature


http://www.altertuemliches.at/gemaelde/rembrandt-nachtwache

http://www.rembrandtpainting.net/rembrandt's_night_watch.htm


http://www.artdaily.com/index.asp?int_sec=11&int_new=29632&int_modo=2#.UMnyBm-ZS8A

12.1. Image adresses:


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http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0b/Rembrandt_van_Rijn-De_Nachtwacht-1642.jpg

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