



Rembrandt
A Life

CHARLES L. MEE JR.





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Prologue

The very first glimpse that we have of Rembrandt is a self-portrait - one of his earliest surviving etchings, done when he was twenty-four years old. He is facing directly forward. His hair is long and wild, as though he had just been struck by lightning. His eyes are fierce and blazing, and one of them has a slight sideways cast to it. He is frowning. He has a stubble of a beard and a big gob of a nose. He looks dirty, as though he had been sleeping in his clothes, and he is wearing what seems to be a filthy fur. This is an ugly derelict of a young man - dirty, sweaty, smelly, a determined outsider - and he looks as though he would not step aside for anyone passing him on the sidewalk.

In another etching that Rembrandt made at about the same time, he is abruptly different - a sweet, soft, sensitive young man. A delicate shadow falls across one side of his face. He gives a come-hither look.

In another etching, he's making a face: He has that same shock of hair again, the same big nose, a thick, workingman's neck, a bit of baby fat still in the cheeks. His brows are drawn up, his lips are pursed, his eyes are wide with mock horror.

In another, he laughs - or else, maybe, the way his mouth is drawn up, he sneers.

In another, he looks as though he might be hurrying along the street, a man of purpose, and he has just turned to shoot a penetrating, irritated glance at us, as though we had bumped into him or stepped on his toe.

In another, he is monarchical, with a great soft sack of a hat that might (or might not) be a crown and a collar that might (or might not) be ermine.

In another, he is bland, insufferably self-possessed, sure of himself, a young know-it-all.

In another, he is a grandee, a self-admiring young man of the court.

In another, he is a beggar, neglected and hungry.

In another, he cries out like a wounded animal.

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In another, he is a simple young man, not posturing, but trying to seem just as he is - frowning, as though he wishes to see more deeply and directly into the mirror he is using for these self-portraits.

Theatre people often call Rembrandt the William Shakespeare of painters - for his ability to penetrate character, his compassion for everyone he portrays, for his sense of seizing the dramatic moment and presenting it with stunning effect, and because in his art he was one of the very few who was Shakespeare's equal - a phenomenon of creation, like Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart or the Grand Canyon. But sometimes Rembrandt seems to be a whole Shakespeare play all by himself - one moment a young prince, the next moment a suffering beggar, then a clown pulling faces, then a hostile drunk, a monarch, a sensitive young poet, a man of action, a lost soul, a simple, honest man.

The question is: Somewhere in all these pictures is it possible to find the authentic Rembrandt?