In a moment of inner anguish Lucretia stands, with arms outstretched, just prior to her act of suicide. Although her body faces the viewer, she looks down toward the sharply pointed dagger clenched in her right hand. She holds her left hand open at the same height as the right, as though part of her resists completing the self-destructive act. The tension surrounding that awful moment emphasizes the human drama of a woman caught in the moral dilemma of choosing between life and honor, a choice that would take on symbolic connotations.

The tragedy of Lucretia's impending suicide is intensified in the contrast Rembrandt develops between her elegant attire and the poignancy of her gesture and expressions. Richly adorned with golden diadem, pearl earrings, pearl necklace, and a chain with a golden pendant from which hangs a tear-shaped pearl, she is a regal figure. Her golden dress with a cape that falls over her outstretched arms adds to her splendor. Rembrandt, however, arranged her robes so as to emphasize her vulnerability. The clasps that hook her dress at the bodice hang unfastened. With her dress parted, her chest covered only by the white chemise that fits so gracefully, she is about to thrust the dagger into her heart.

The tragic story of Lucretia, recounted by Livy, took place during the reign of the tyrannical ruler Tarquinius Superbus in Rome in the sixth century BC. While away during the siege of Ardea, Lucretia's husband, Collatinus, boasted that her loyalty and virtue were greater than that of his compatriots' wives. Taking up the challenge, the men at camp rode immediately to Rome where they discovered Lucretia alone with her handmaidens, spinning wool while other wives were idly enjoying their leisure. Lucretia's very virtue, however, inflamed the desire of
Tarquinius' son, Sextus Tarquinius, who returned without Collatinus' knowledge a few days later. Having been received as an honored guest, he later stole secretly to Lucretia's chamber, drew his sword, and threatened to kill her if she did not yield to him. She resisted, but when Sextus Tarquinius threatened to kill his own slave as well and place their naked bodies together to give the appearance that they had been killed in the act of adultery, she yielded to his demands rather than die in such disgrace.

The next day Lucretia summoned her father and husband to her side and related what had happened, stressing that only her body had been violated, not her heart. Despite their protestations of her innocence, she was determined to make the moral choice that fate had forced upon her, saying: “Never shall Lucretia provide a precedent for unchaste women to escape what they deserve.” Livy relates that with these words Lucretia drew a knife from under her robe, drove it into her heart, and fell forward, dead.[1]

Overwhelmed by grief, Lucretia’s father, her husband, and two accompanying friends swore to avenge her death. Her suicide helped rouse the anger of the populace against the tyrannical rule of Tarquinius Superbus, who was forced into exile. Sextus Tarquinius, who was also driven from Rome, was assassinated shortly thereafter. In Livy’s account Lucretia embodied chastity, but her tragedy assumed wider political dimensions because she was also considered a metaphor for Rome itself. Lucretia’s rape came to symbolize the tyrannical subjugation of the city by Tarquinius Superbus and his family.[2] Her rape triggered the revolt that led to the overthrow of tyranny and the creation of political freedom in the form of a republican government.

Rembrandt painted at least three images of Lucretia in his later years. The earliest of these is known only through an inventory of the possessions of Abraham Wijs and Sara de Potter, made on March 1, 1658. The inventory lists: “A large painting of Lucretia, by R: Van Rijn.”[3] The two extant images date from the last decade of Rembrandt’s life: the Washington Lucretia, 1664, and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts’ Lucretia, 1666 [fig. 1]. In the Gallery’s haunting image, Rembrandt has evoked both Lucretia’s profound sadness and her resignation to the fate forced upon her. In the Minneapolis version, Rembrandt has portrayed Lucretia just after she has stabbed herself, her chemise already stained by blood from the mortal wound. The two images complement each other not only because their compositions and painterly qualities are similar, but also because they explore Lucretia’s emotions as she readies herself prior to her self-sacrifice and then responds to the
consequences of her action. Nevertheless, they do not seem to have been conceived as a pair. The models Rembrandt used are different and their robes and jewelry, though similar in type, are not identical.[4]

As Stechow has demonstrated, three traditions exist for the representation of the Lucretia story: “narrative combinations of various scenes pertaining to the legend; dramatic scenes concentrating entirely on Tarquinius’ misdeed; and single figures of Lucretia stabbing herself.”[5] Rembrandt's image belongs to the last. He certainly knew a number of earlier representations of Lucretia through prints and engravings, although only one has been suggested as a prototype for the Washington painting: Marcantonio Raimondi’s engraving after a Raphael design [fig. 2].[6] The essential transformation of the idealized statuesque figure into the emotionally evocative image of Rembrandt's Lucretia, however, argues that the relationship is more superficial than real. Far closer in spirit to Rembrandt, however, are half-length depictions of Lucretia by Titian and his school that represent the heroine dressed in loose-fitting robes and poised at the moment before she thrusts the dagger into her heart.[7] Rembrandt, who was profoundly influenced by Venetian art during his later years, may have known of such depictions of Lucretia, for a number of such paintings ascribed to Titian or Paolo Veronese were in Archduke Leopold Wilhelm’s collection in Brussels during the 1650s.[8] The painting of this compositional type that Rembrandt certainly knew, and used as a basis for other paintings in the 1640s and 1650s, was Titian’s Flora [fig. 3], which was auctioned in Amsterdam in 1639.[9] The similarities in the general disposition of Lucretia’s head in the Washington painting and that of Flora suggest that this work continued to exert its influence on Rembrandt into the mid-1660s. Even supposing such antecedents could have helped provide the visual vocabulary for the rich pictorial effects and iconic composition of Rembrandt’s painting, the psychological characterization of Lucretia’s emotional state is entirely personal.

No record of commissions exists for these works, nor other information concerning Rembrandt’s motivation for painting them. Schwartz has suggested that the paintings have political overtones.[10] Because Lucretia’s suicide precipitated the revolt that helped institute the Roman Republic, she had traditionally been viewed, among her other qualities, as a symbol of patriotism. That such an attribute was associated with her in Rembrandt’s time is clear from a poem written by Jan Vos in 1660, quoted by Schwartz, about a Lucretia painted by Govaert Flinck (Dutch, 1615 - 1660) in the collection of Joan Huydecoper, one of the most influential patrons of the day: “In the red ink [of her blood] she writes a definition of freedom.” Lucretia,
then, may well have assumed particular allegorical importance in the parallels that
were being drawn around 1660 between the foundations of the Roman and Dutch
Republics, as did Claudius Civilis, the first-century rebel leader of the Batavian
revolt and the subject of Rembrandt’s 1661 painting for the Amsterdam Town
Hall.[11]

The forceful impact of Rembrandt’s paintings of Lucretia, however, seems also to
have resulted from personal associations the artist made between experiences in
his life and the emotional traumas that he projected onto Lucretia at the time of her
suicide. Only thus can we explain the essential transformation of the pictorial
traditions for portraying this legendary Roman heroine that occurs in the two
majestic paintings in Washington and Minneapolis.

Lucretia, in maintaining her honor through death, come to be revered as a symbol
of chastity, honor, and faithfulness. Knuttel speculated that the 1664 Lucretia may
have served as a psychological catharsis for Rembrandt after the death of his
companion, Hendrickje, the previous year. Indeed, parallels can be found between
Lucretia’s faithfulness and self-sacrifice and the indignities Hendrickje suffered as a
result of her commitment to Rembrandt.[12]

The mythology surrounding Lucretia, however, was complex. While she was
honored for her faithfulness she was also criticized by later Christians for having
taken her own life, which was seen as a greater evil than adultery and a life of
shame. As Garrard has written: “In Roman terms, Lucretia killed herself not out of
guilt, but out of shame, concerned for her reputation and for the precedent of
pardon that she might set for voluntary adulterers. Christian writers, schooled in a
religion that placed the highest premium on the innocence of one’s personal
conscience, regarded such values as excessively concerned with appearances and
the opinion of others.”[13] Rembrandt, as he so often did, fused here the pagan and
Christian worlds to create an exceptionally profound image of the psychological
moment just prior to Lucretia’s fatal decision to thrust the knife into her heart. With
her arms raised in a gesture that echoes that of Christ on the cross, she looks
down toward the weapon of her destruction with an expression of one who, in her
decision to commit suicide, must weigh issues never described by Livy:
Rembrandt’s Lucretia is not the assured tragic heroine who has determined her
punishment and dies for honor, but one who hesitates at that crucial moment
because of an awareness of the moral dilemma that she faces.
It may be, as Held has remarked, that Rembrandt drew upon a theatrical tradition to give added poignancy to the moment, for Lucretia, whose mouth is partially open, seems to address the dagger as though giving the closing monologue of this tragic drama.[14] Shakespeare did exactly that in his *Rape of Lucretia* when she asks:

Poor hand, why quiver'st thou in this decree?
Honour thyself to rid me of this shame;
For if I die, my honour lives in thee,
But if I live, thou livest in my defame.[15]

Rembrandt’s late paintings, whether portraits, biblical accounts, or mythological stories, often take on an almost sacramental character in the way that the artist confronts the viewer with his images. His broad execution, rich colors, impressive use of chiaroscuro, and iconic compositional structure give these works unparalleled forcefulness. In *Lucretia*, all of these elements of his late style are evident. Particularly remarkable in this painting is his use of chiaroscuro to transform an essentially symmetrical and static pose into an active one. Lucretia is lit not from the front but from the left. Light thus strikes her head, right arm, and shoulder. The dagger blade glistens against her white cuff. Although her left arm is thrown into shadow, her outstretched left hand catches the light. Through these subtle means of emphasis, which until the mid-1980s had been hidden by thick, discolored layers of varnish, Rembrandt heightened the drama by reinforcing the psychological and physical tension of the scene.[16]

Rembrandt painted this image using a broad range of techniques. He modeled the face quite densely by applying a sequence of paint layers. Some layers, such as the soft lavenders that model the shaded portions of the lower cheeks and chin, are quite smooth. Others, such as the pinks and oranges that highlight the cheekbones and the yellowish-whitish areas on the nose and forehead, are brushed on more vigorously. The eyes, nose, and mouth are broadly rendered. Specifics of eyebrows, eyelids, pupils of the eyes, nostrils, and lips were of little concern to the artist; instead he heightened and accented them with deft touches of rust-colored paint. One particularly bold stroke of ocher paint defines the upper left edge of the top lip.

Rembrandt varied his painting techniques in Lucretia’s cape and dress according to the play of light falling across her figure. Where light hits her right arm, Rembrandt cast a golden tone with a rich mixture of yellow, white, red, and salmon-
colored paints. Under the lightest areas of the shoulder, he first laid in a light gray layer to give an added luminosity to the paints. On the shaded left sleeve, the paint is much less dense. A deep brown and reddish brown layer covering the ground in this area forms the basis for the sleeve’s tonality. Over it, Rembrandt, often with a dry brush, applied yellow, greenish yellow, red, and white highlights. In certain instances, for example, in a series of black strokes that shade part of the sleeve, he clearly used a palette knife as well as a brush.

Rembrandt utilized the palette knife even more frequently in the white of the left sleeve. Here he applied a rather dry paint onto the underlying brown layer to suggest the material’s transparency. More extensive use of the palette knife is seen in the dress near Lucretia’s waist. Here he spread broader areas of light-ocher paint with the knife to suggest the luminous character of the fabric. In general, the treatment of this area of the dress resembles that of the left sleeve where the underlying dark brown paint becomes an important ingredient in the overall color tonality. The one area with thick highlights in the dress is the belt, but even here Rembrandt did not really overlap paints. The accents of yellow, orange, and white are loosely applied and do not define the belt to any great degree.[17]

Stylistically, this painting resembles the so-called Jewish Bride in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. The head of Lucretia is extremely close in type and in concept to that of the bride: both are built up in a comparable fashion. Remarkably similar are the ways in which the features are modeled with dense and somewhat roughly brushed strokes of paint. The similarities extend to the technique for the modeling of the pearls and even for indicating the gold diadem in the back of the hair. While most of the robes in the Jewish Bride are more densely painted than those of Lucretia and are built up almost exclusively with a palette knife, in the shaded area under the collar of the man Rembrandt used a modeling technique very similar to that seen in Lucretia’s left arm. Here he also used a brownish imprimatura layer for the base collar of the robe and accented it lightly with a series of thin strokes of red paint applied with a palette knife.[18]

Similarities in painting technique also exist between this figure of Lucretia and that in Minneapolis, even though the latter work was painted two years later, in 1666. As is appropriate to its starker concept, Rembrandt applied his paints in a more angular fashion in the Minneapolis version than he did in the Washington painting. Still, the modeling of the facial features is once again comparable. One notices in particular the way the top lip is defined with a bold stroke of flesh-colored paint along its upper edge. Also similar is the use of an imprimatura layer as a base color.
of the left sleeve, and finally, the structure of the hand holding the dagger.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.
April 24, 2014
COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Rembrandt van Rijn, *Lucretia*, 1666, oil on canvas, Minneapolis Institute of Arts


fig. 3 Titian, *Portrait of a Woman, Called “Flora”*, c. 1520–1522, oil on canvas, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Photo: Uffizi-Photo Index/Vasari, Florence

NOTES


[4] The features in the Washington *Lucretia* resemble Rembrandt’s companion Hendrickje Stoffels, as she is seen in Rembrandt’s paintings from the mid-1650s (Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, inv. no. 828B). Hendrickje, who appears much older in the portrait of 1660 in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, had died in July 1663. The model Rembrandt used for the Minneapolis *Lucretia* is not found in other of Rembrandt’s paintings.


[7] The most profound sixteenth-century images of Lucretia were created in Venice. In two memorable paintings, Tarquin and Lucretia (Gemäldegalerie der Akademie der bildenden Künste, Vienna) and Tarquin and Lucretia (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge), Titian focused on the dramatic confrontation between Tarquin and Lucretia, capturing the animal energy of Tarquin blindly driven by lust.


[10] Gary Schwartz, Rembrandt: zijn leven, zijn schilderijen (Maarssen, 1984), 330, no. 382, repro. (English trans., Rembrandt: His Life, His Paintings [New York, 1985], 330). It seems unlikely, however, that there is any pro-Orange or anti-Orange sentiment implied in these works, as Schwartz suggests.


[12] In 1654 Hendrickje, who lived with Rembrandt but was not married to him, had been publicly disgraced when a tribune of the Dutch Reformed Church condemned her for “living in sin like a whore” with the artist. After Hendrickje’s death in 1663, Rembrandt may have linked the tribulations she had suffered and the emotional traumas he projected onto Lucretia. The resemblance of Lucretia to Hendrickje as she appeared in the mid-1650s (see note 4) seems to reinforce this hypothesis. For his part, Rembrandt identified himself with a historical figure in his Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul of 1661 (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam), in which the sword of Paul’s martyrdom protrudes from Rembrandt’s chest.
TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The original coarse, plain-weave fabric, composed of heavy, unevenly spun threads, has been lined. The top, right, and left edges have been trimmed slightly, leaving worn and ragged edges. The bottom was at one time used as a tacking margin, but has now been returned to the picture plane. Slight cusping present
along the top and sides, but not the bottom, suggests a reduction in that dimension.

The double ground consists of a thick, gray lower layer and a moderately thin, dark brown upper layer.[1] In the dark areas, particularly the background, the dark brown upper ground layer was incorporated into the design, and in the upper left and lower right quadrants the upper ground was deliberately scraped away to expose the gray lower ground layer as part of the composition. In the richly impasted details on the dress, paint was applied thickly and freely with broad brushwork. Paint was both blended wet-into-wet and scumbled with a dry brush to exploit the coarse canvas texture. Extensive use of the palette knife can be recognized in the proper left cuff and in the lower portion of the dress. Incisions with the butt end of the brush are found in the proper left cuff and on the neck.

Several pentimenti have become visible over time. The dagger was once 3.5 cm longer, and the sitter’s proper right sleeve has been altered. Stray brushmarks cross the dress and white blouse at right, suggesting alterations to the neckline.

The paint is in good condition with few losses. Wide-aperture drying crackle has formed on either side of the head. Moderate abrasion has occurred in the darks, and the bottom tacking margin has been overpainted to incorporate it into the design. Conservation treatment was carried out in 1985 to remove an aged, discolored varnish layer and discolored inpainting.

[1] The ground composition was analyzed by the NGA Scientific Research department using cross-sections (see report dated May 8, 1985, in NGA Conservation files).

PROVENANCE

Jean-Joseph-Pierre-Augustin Lapeyrière [1779-1831, known as Augustin Lapeyrière, then de Lapeyrière], Paris; (his sale, Galerie Le Brun, Paris, 19 April 1825 and days following [originally scheduled for 14 March 1825 and days following], no. 143). Michael M. Zachary [d. 1837], London;[1] (sale, Phillips, London, 14-15 April 1826, 1st day, no. 64, bought in); (Zachary sale, Phillips, London, 31 May 1828, no. 25); purchased by Sir Thomas Lawrence [1769-1830] for Hugh Andrew Johnstone

[1] Although the main seller at the April 1826 sale was Lord Berwick, there were also other consignors. One annotation in the Wallace Collection (London) Library’s copy of the sale catalogue indicates that Zachary was the consigner of the NGA painting; another annotation next to the Lucretia entry reads “Sir T Lawrence.” The Getty Provenance Index© Database, Sale Catalogs, lot 0064 from sale catalog Br-2806, identifies the latter annotation as indicating a previous owner.

[2] This information is given by Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten holländischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts, 10 vols., Esslingen and Paris, 1907-1928: 6(1915):120, no. 218 (also English edition, Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century, trans. Edward G. Hawke, 8 vols., London, 1907–1927: 6(1916):143-144, no. 218). However, the Wallace Collection (London) Library’s copy of the sale catalogue is annotated with the name “Woodin” as the buyer (The Getty Provenance Index© Database, Sale Catalogs, lot 0025 from sale catalog BR-3135). Munro acquired a significant collection that was dispersed in sales both before and after his death, but the painting has not been located in any of the sale catalogues. Hofstede de Groot lists a Munro sale in London on 26 March 1859 (given as 26 March 1851, in the 1920-1921 exhibition catalogue), which has not been identified; the painting does not
appear in a sale of Munro’s English pictures held in London on 26 March 1860.


[6] Newspapers speculated that Knoedler’s might have been buying for the New York collector Henry Clay Frick; copies of various articles are in NGA curatorial files.


[9] The painting was included in a 1920-1921 exhibition of Heilbuth's collection in Copenhagen.


**EXHIBITION HISTORY**

1832 British Institution for Promoting the Fine Arts in the United Kingdom, London, 1832, no. 44.[1]


**EXHIBITION HISTORY NOTES**

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