

Kathryn Miriam McSweeney:  
*Cut From The Same Cloth*

Nestled inside Buckingham Palace, amongst the masterpieces of the Royal Collection, resides the haunting beauty of Rembrandt's *Portrait of Agatha Bas*. She exudes a quiet intensity, advancing from the dark background into the light, as if to greet each viewer. Her eyes make direct contact, unhesitatingly, yet she looks as if she were to speak it would be in a whisper. The outwardly antithetical portrait to Agatha Bas, hangs prominently at The Louvre, although Rembrandt's *Bathsheba* does not seem to notice the daily bustle of the museum. She sits lost in her thoughts, likely contemplating the letter in her hands. She seems aware of her sexuality, the ease of her unabashed posture, while simultaneously appearing deep in thought. How does an Artist shift from detailed depictions of wealthy, well-dressed bourgeoisie to psychological studies in thick impasto? There are many factors that shaped Rembrandt's progression towards his later style of broad, painterly brushstrokes that, inexplicably, express feelings of introspection and sensitivity. I, too, have an alternative view of Rembrandt's late works, which was initially inspired by the book *Fashion and Fancy* by Marieke de Winkel. Her thorough examination of clothing and accessories in Rembrandt's paintings reveal a hidden language of dress within such portraits as those of Agatha Bas, Jan Six and Oopjen Coppit. I attempt to juxtapose such an interpretation of Rembrandt's portraits, specifically the subtle implications of Dutch women's conservative dress, by also considering the influence of the prosperous Dutch textile industry, which both Agatha Bas and Jan Six were affiliated, as were many of Rembrandt's sitters. In *Vexations of Art: Velazquez and Others*, Svetlana Alpers, whose writings on Dutch art encouraged this essay, emphasizes the importance of the textile industry to the *Dutch Golden Age*, noting, "men working in textiles played a major role in achieving Dutch primacy in world trade."<sup>1</sup> The profitable textile industry greatly contributed to the rise of the Dutch bourgeoisie, allowing this new class the financial ability to enjoy the pleasures of life, such as having a portrait painted, a lifestyle previously reserved for royalty and nobility. I believe these liberties led more men and women to think about daily existence and personal experience. In the next several pages, I will attempt to link the thriving Dutch textile industry and the rituals of Dutch women's dress between 1600 and 1650 to a cultural shift towards naturalism and self-reflection, in turn, influencing Rembrandt's depictions of women in his late works. Following de Winkel's example, I, too, will use the word *dress* to refer to clothing for the remainder of this essay.

#### **A. A survey of the Dutch textile industry from c. 1600 to 1650.**

*The Syndics of the Drapers Guild of Amsterdam* of 1662 is one of Rembrandt's most famous paintings and an appropriate catalyst to this discussion of the people, practice and

protocol of the Dutch textile industry. Group portraits depicting members of the textile industry, such as *The Syndics*, were quite common throughout the seventeenth century. This fact alone may not seem so remarkable until compared to the lack of similar depictions of other popular professions, for example bakers or brewers.<sup>2</sup> In *Images of Textiles: The Weave of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art and Society* published in 1985, Linda A. Stone-Ferrier explains that many profitable industries in Amsterdam were not organized into guilds, and without a guild, nor guildhall, such industries were denied, as she writes, “any collective display of pride.” The guilds provided a complex and centralized system that encouraged the proper functioning of the textile industry. Stone-Ferrier also believes it was a sense of comradeship that motivated members to celebrate their remarkable success with a substantial group portrait.<sup>3</sup> The role of the guilds is further explored in Paul Zumthor’s book from 1994 titled *Daily Life in Rembrandt’s Holland*. He states that the guilds emerged from medieval “fraternities,” established to control manufactured goods and distribution. Zumthor explains further that the guild’s governing body was composed of one or several “doyens” (defined as a man who is the most experienced and respected member of the group) and the assistants to the “doyens”. Each guild had its own seal and banner, as well as distinctive furniture, tableware and glassware. Zumthor goes on to mention that when these officials met for business, typically once a week, the meetings often developed into rowdy parties.<sup>4</sup> With this basic knowledge of the guilds, we can then ask, who were the Syndics? In Mariet Westermann’s book *Rembrandt* from 2000 she describes *The Syndics* as men who “were appointed to maintain standards of quality for dyed cloth production.”<sup>5</sup> Zumthor explains that “all (Dutch) products were stamped, and anything not bearing the appropriate seal was confiscated and destroyed if found.”<sup>6</sup> In Leiden, a lucrative center for textile production, cloth was available for sale at the guildhall, which made making a profit straightforward and less costly, since there was no need for a third party.<sup>7</sup>

Leiden, famous as the birthplace of Rembrandt, was the largest single industrial concentration in Europe, producing cloth to a sum of 9 million guilders annually. Likewise, Haarlem was a comparable center for Dutch textile production, internationally recognized for their superior dyeing and finishing capabilities, a process which was costly, but highly profitable.<sup>8</sup> It was circumstances slightly before the turn of the seventeenth century that enabled such growth.<sup>9</sup> This was mainly due to two interrelated reasons, the influx of displaced Flemish and Brabantine textile workers into both Leiden and Haarlem and the demand, in the case of Leiden, for *nieuwe draperies* or *New Draperies*. Similar in idea to the popular and less expensive blended fabrics we have today, the *New Draperies* were a mix of woolen yarn with other fibers, such as cotton or silk, producing a lighter-weight fabric that became more appealing than the *lakens*, or *Old Draperies*, made of heavy “pure” woolen cloth.<sup>10</sup> The *New Draperies* became all

the rage, allowing the Dutch to surpass their English competitors. It is important to recognize the fiscal acumen of Leiden's officials within the textile industry during this period of the late sixteenth century. Leiden's officials, such as Jan van Hout, the city's secretary, possessed the shrewdness to utilize the unfortunate circumstance of the refugees to the city's advantage.<sup>11</sup> Isaac van Swanenburgh's paintings from 1594-1612 depicting the textile industry exemplify the importance of Leiden's most valuable trade. Van Swanenburgh, the local Leiden artist who Rembrandt first served as apprentice, was commissioned to paint various aspects of the textile industry for display at the Leiden guildhall as a gift to Jan van Hout. We see here, *The Shearing and Combing of the Wool*, one of the six paintings in the series. Both Rembrandt and Jacob van Ruisdael captured the vastness of Haarlem's renowned linen-bleaching industry within the panoramic beauty of the surrounding landscape. In Rembrandt's 1651 dry point and etching, known as *The Goldweaver's Field*, the artist features workers in the linen-bleaching fields near Saxenburg, the estate belonging to Christoffel Thijsz, the man who sold Rembrandt his Amsterdam home.<sup>12</sup>

Michael North begins his chapter on "Dutch Society" proclaiming, "The Dutch no longer defined their social position by enumerating the privileges conferred on them by birth but instead by their mercantile status."<sup>13</sup> An excellent personification of the possibilities of the merchant class is the gentleman Jan Six. He was born in 1618, third son of an immigrant father who died two months earlier. His widowed Mother valiantly took over the family's profitable cloth-dyeing and silk-weaving business and by 1631 she was one of Amsterdam's wealthiest women. Six went on to become a major player in the Amsterdam elite. In his lifetime he accumulated an extensive collection of Arts and books, married the daughter of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp and was appointed burgomaster in 1691. His fame continues today as the subject of one of Rembrandt's most famous portraits.<sup>14</sup> Rembrandt's broad, impressionistic brushstrokes make up the majority of the portrait, excluding the face, which is treated with refinement, emphasizing Six's contemplative expression. In Public Faces and Private Identities in Seventeenth Century Holland: Portraiture and the Production of Community, Ann Jensen Adams stresses the significance of the philosophical writings of Rene Descartes and John Locke during this period.<sup>15</sup> Rembrandt's *Portrait of Jan Six* represents the emergence of the modern man in the seventeenth century, a sentient being that will be further transformed in the eighteenth century.

## **B. Dutch women's dress from c. 1600 to 1650.**

When I began this essay, I was particularly interested in Sumptuary Laws in relation to Dutch women's dress. I had wrongly assumed that the predominance of black in women's dress was due to such governance. To my surprise, Holland had very few sumptuary laws, in contrast

to other major European countries such as England and France.<sup>16</sup> What, then, was the reason for such widespread devotion to black? In Michel Pastoureau's fascinating book *Black: a History of a Color*, from 2009, he explains two significant influences on black dress in Holland. First was the black, as he describes as that of, "kings and princes, luxurious black, originating in the Burgandy court in the period of Philip the Good and transmitted to the Spanish court," then there was, "the black of monks and clerics, of humility and temperance."<sup>17</sup> The religious climate in Holland certainly affected the dress of both men and women, for example, the Mennonites, which de Winkel writes "both lived and dressed in a conspicuously sober and restrained manner." This is evident in Rembrandt's *Portrait of Cornelis Calaes. Anslo and Aeltje Schouten* from 1641. Anslo was a famous Mennonite preacher and rich, having profited from the cloth trade. Despite their wealth, both sitters are portrayed in plain dress, in accordance with Mennonite custom.<sup>18</sup> In fact, dress was such an important, and obvious, display of faith that it, ironically, caused contemporaries to feel that it was a pretentious display of superiority. de Winkel cites the writings of Reverend Tellnick, a consistent supporter of simplicity in dress, yet, he writes of "monks, some Mennonites and other hypocrites," that "there are some who dress with austerity more from pride than from true fear of God and they often take more pride in their modest garb than other persons in their ostentatious dress."<sup>19</sup> Indeed, there is an understated opulence in Aeltje's dress in this painting. Although her dress is old-fashioned in style, the fabric is of the best quality. The Dutch theologian, Jacobus Trigland, described this way of dressing by Mennonites as *Fariseeische hijpocrisie*, which he defines as being "in plain and simple clothes with only a small band, but in the meantime the fabrics are quite costly, although they do not seem to be."<sup>20</sup> As exemplified in Aeltje's out-dated ensemble, Holland, at large, was slow to accept new styles in dress and was often years behind French fashion, the undisputed style-makers of the seventeenth century. Yet, as exemplified in the choice materials of Aeltje's dress, fashion was not wholly lost on the Dutch. North explains, "although people dressed discreetly in black, which gives the present-day viewer an impression of restraint, the material was so fine, and was trimmed with such expensive lace that everyone was perfectly aware of just how prosperous they were."<sup>21</sup> Surely not everyone in Dutch society felt uncomfortable showing his or her affluence, such as the chic newlywed, Oopen Coppit; still a delicate choreography of such a display of wealth was in play subtly captured in portraiture during this period. Coppit wears the latest high-waisted French style, showing that she is quite fashionable and, more importantly, she can afford it. de Winkel describes Coppit's dress as conveying "youth and wealth with a touch of worldliness and an outgoing self-confidence that is a result of the realization of dressing according to the latest styles."<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Westermann points out that standing, full-length portraiture was traditionally reserved for sovereigns and rare for middle-class citizens.<sup>23</sup> Coppit came from a prominent Amsterdam family, perhaps she fashioned herself as the new royalty?

The signals of the viewer's private desires were not only communicated in dress, but often in their conscientiously chosen accouterments. de Winkel cites David Smith's theory that the fan held by Agatha Bas means more, he states, "the fact that Dutch sitters hold fans or gloves often indicates a reference to sexuality or at least to love."<sup>24</sup> The question beckons, who is Agatha Bas, or maybe, what did Rembrandt think Agatha Bas thought of herself? Westermann notes that her pose is "unusually forthright for a seventeenth-century portrait of a woman: rather than turning towards her husband, she stands frontally."<sup>25</sup> Winkel delves deeper into the symbolism of the fan she gracefully holds towards the bottom of the canvas, writing "fans and handkerchiefs were costly as well as fashionable accessories whose primary function was to display their owners wealth and status."<sup>26</sup> Smith surmises that the fan may also be an allusion to Bas' pregnant state, as she is most likely depicted during the first months of pregnancy.<sup>27</sup> de Winkel dismisses this notion, instead citing Rembrandt's intent to create a *tromp l'oeil* effect as the most plausible motive for the placement of the fan.<sup>28</sup> The beautifully depicted fan complements Rembrandt's overall attention to Bas' impeccable dress, which can be seen as a possible allusion to her husband's successful cloth business.<sup>29</sup> Or perhaps Rembrandt is invoking, as Stone-Ferrier reminds us, the rich, Netherlandish history of depicting textiles, such as in Jan van Eyck's undisputed masterpiece *The Arnolfini Portrait* of 1434.<sup>30</sup> Like Coppit, Bas, too, was from a respected family, and for both women, the portrait was an opportunity to display her sophistication, wealth and fashionable nature within the boundaries of Dutch culture.

Conversely, in France, it seems the notion of subtleness was perhaps lost in translation. In 1633 and 1634, Louis XIII was forced to issue two edicts to control Frenchwomen's insatiable appetite for fashion, both of which were mocked and satirized. In fact, one such caricature even featured a Flemish tradesman, visibly upset, alongside the following:

“Que fait-on publier? Que venons-nous d'entendre?  
Mettons bas la boutique, et de nos passements  
Faisons des cordes pour nous pendre!

Translated into English, the caption reads:

“What is it that is published? What do we hear?  
Let us shut up shop, and of our goods make  
Ropes To hang ourselves withal”

When such laws were passed to limit the conspicuous use of lace, the bourgeoisies instead wore mass amounts of ribbon. In *The History of Fashion in France*, M. Augustin Challamel describes

the whole French people as “ribbon mad.”<sup>31</sup> The English, too, were ribbon enthusiasts, using immense quantities of ribbon to adorn fashionable garments in seventeenth-century.<sup>32</sup> By 1634, young English women are depicted in portraiture with a bared décolletage, as can be seen in the *Portrait of Anne Oxenden* by Cornelius Johnson van Ceulen from 1636.<sup>28</sup> Embroidery also seems to have been distinctive to English dress from the period of 1600 to 1630, as there are a number of examples that have survived from the period, as noted by Madeleine Ginsburg on behalf of the Victoria and Albert Museum. The fine embroidered decoration often depicted flowers and birds, as can be seen here, an embroidered bodice worn by Margaret Laton in c. 1620.<sup>33</sup>

Most Dutch women in the first half of the seventeenth-century, like most women today, could not afford to flaunt such excesses of wealth and also lacked a desire to do so. Zumthor explains “at the beginning of the seventeenth-century any display of elegance was viewed with suspicion, and it took fifty years for this obstinate prejudice to diminish to any extent.”<sup>34</sup> North further notes, “the middle class dressed more modestly because the Parisian fashions were expensive; a pair of good French stockings, for example, cost fourteen guilders, a sum that could keep someone in bread for six months.”<sup>35</sup> Stone-Ferrier cites sixteenth-century ladies’ handbooks, too, as precedence for such modesty in luxurious dress. In one such book, the author, Vives, states that “rich dress served only to attract men.” He also warned that any attempt to approve on the appearance that God bestowed upon a lady was considered sinful.”<sup>36</sup>

The standard garments for Dutch women’s dress in the early seventeenth century included a *vlieger*, a type of robe-like overgarment, which was usually black, and sometimes lined with fur, and a *huik*, or cloak, which after 1650 was no longer used in bourgeois families. These garments were often worn in conjunction with a cap and ruff. With the exception of society women and some peasant women, “all Dutch women wore caps,” notes Zumthor.<sup>37</sup> Van Thienen reveals that the cap was derived from medieval custom, with origins in scripture. In the First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians (Chapter XI) it is written, “every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head.” Winged caps were worn until approximately 1620, and then seen rarely from 1620 to 1640, and from 1640 onward they are reduced in size. The pleated ruff, arguably the most recognizable feature of seventeenth century dress, was developed in the sixteenth-century from the gathered end of chemise into an individual garment.<sup>38</sup> Ruffs were often worn with a supportive garment, called a *supportasse*.<sup>39</sup> The French set style precedence early in the century, when they shifted from the severe ruff to an eventual falling ruff, a version of which can be seen in a *Self-Portrait* by Rembrandt from 1632. There were a variety of ruffs, but by 1630 the ruff had gone out of fashion and was replaced by the starched fichu.<sup>40</sup> Representations of such dress is implicit in many of Rembrandt’s early

portraits, including *Portrait of an Eighty-Three Year Old Woman (Portrait of Aechje Claesdr.)* from 1634. The woman, who has recently been identified as Aechje Claesdr., wears a two-part linen cap, the curved wings of which are held at the bottom by a gold head-band. She also sports a linen ruff that rests on the collar of her black *vlieger*, which has *bragonen*, round shoulder-coils.<sup>41</sup> The staunch character of her face is matched by the severity of her old-fashioned dress. Adams' research reveals that there was a belief at this time that "details and flaws show appreciation of God who Himself is the only Knower of perfection." She goes on to quote such a sitter, Oliver Cromwell, who requested to his painter, "paint me as I am. If you leave out scars and wrinkles, I will not pay you a shilling."<sup>42</sup> In Rembrandt's portrait of a middle-aged woman from the same year, *Portrait of Haesje van Cleyburgh*, the distinct simplicity in dress contributes to the sitter's perceived character. As mentioned previously, the ruff was no longer in vogue by 1634, also, van Thienen notes, the shoulders, visible in this portrait, had since been camouflaged by the new large, flat collar.<sup>43</sup> van Cleyburgh, who was fifty-one when she sat for this portrait, shows us through dress, just as Agatha Bas does, who she is, or more accurately, who she wants you to think she is. Contrary to the younger Bas and Coppit, van Cleyburgh is not interested in the latest styles, nor is she showing off her financial status. Van Cleyburgh is perhaps adhering to Adams' theory of *Tranquillitas*, which she describes as an emotional state of rational self-control that became a valued personal ideal in the wake of sixteenth century revival of Imperial Roman Stoicism.<sup>44</sup>

### **C. How Rembrandt's style and Dutch society evolve in the second-half of the seventeenth-century.**

In Alpers' *The Art of Describing*, she notes that "Rembrandt shared the Dutch artist's avid taste for finery," as we saw earlier in his *Portrait of Agatha Bas*. She goes on to explain, "though this taste continues in his later works, Rembrandt gives us to understand it differently. If we compare his painted garments to the silks of ter Borch," she notes, "it appears that Rembrandt has forsaken that competition among craftsmen which was so enabling to other artists."<sup>45</sup> As Rembrandt's style changed during the turn of the century, so did the textile industry. Leiden producers lost their hold over the lightweight cloth industry. English manufacturers were able to produce cloth at a cheaper price utilizing a rural work-force, which the Dutch could not compete with since their workforce was only partially based in rural areas.<sup>46</sup> Haarlem's silk production went into a final state of decline by the middle of the seventeenth century. Much like today, the cheaper fabrics became more lucrative, and Haarlem lost ground to the same nation who had inadvertently helped them flourish, Flanders and Brabant and also to Amsterdam, where Haarlem silk weavers were lured with higher wages. In 1672 the first significant sumptuary law was passed, not for moral influence over dress, but for patriotic reasons. The Netherlands was at war

with France and the Dutch government wished to regulate the popular French fashions, which had become inappropriate.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, there were new threats starting in 1660 onwards to Europe's woolen industries from Asian textiles imported in increasing quantities and quickly imitated by local manufacturers, sound familiar?<sup>48</sup> North adds that the Dutch stronghold on the market was also weakened by bans on Dutch imports imposed by other European countries.<sup>49</sup> All was not lost though, Leiden's textile industry retaliated by producing, ironically, *lakens or Old Draperies*, which resulted in a surge in that industry in the 1730's. Still, it was during 1638-1648 that Leiden's textile industry was most fruitful.<sup>50</sup> Rembrandt, too, suffered financially in the second half of the seventeenth century. Westermann devotes an entire chapter to such difficulties, beginning with the sale of his home in 1656. She cites the economic depression caused by the Anglo-Dutch war of 1652-4 as a possible reason Rembrandt had difficulty saving his home. He was forced to auction his belongings and eventually move into a less expensive house. It was also during this time when his relationship with his mistress Hendrickje Stoffels became public, when, in 1654, the Reformed Church Council accused her of "whoredom" and summoned Hendrickje to appear before Council.<sup>51</sup> Not coincidentally, this is also the same year Rembrandt paints his famous *Bathsheba*. Although, by all accounts, Holland was still thriving, was there a feeling that the halcyon days had passed? Or perhaps, having adjusted to the new social distinctions, a natural period of reflection had developed?

In Public Faces and Private Identities, Adams discusses in length, and with great insight, the phenomenon of seventeenth-century Dutch portraiture, in which she highlights the following quote by Descartes, "that I can have no knowledge of what is outside of me except by means of the ideas I have within this world."<sup>51</sup> These words seem appropriate when describing the contemplative nature of Rembrandt's *Bathsheba*, who is shown, lost in her thoughts. In Vexations of Art, Alpers prominently includes photographs not only of the *Bathsheba*, but, also, of museum visitors shying away from the painting, instead looking at another of Rembrandt's paintings nearby, of, as she describes, "a disemboweled ox." Alpers surmises this is because it is "rather embarrassing to be caught staring at a naked woman when she does not seem to be welcoming it." Rembrandt's depictions of Hendrickje, including the *Bathsheba* which is likely based on her, portray a modern woman, in the same way Rembrandt's *Portrait of Jan Six* presents the new, thinking man, as discussed earlier. Alpers compares Rembrandt's paintings of Hendrickje to earlier depictions of Saskia, writing, "Saskia is depicted as complicitous in a performance in a way that Hendrickje in these pictures is not."<sup>52</sup>

I end this discussion not with absolute proof, but with the sum of facts and ideas presented here for further contemplation. To what extent did the textile industry and Dutch women's dress affect Rembrandt's shift in artistic style at the turn of the seventeenth century?

As much as, and as little as, everything affected Rembrandt's Art. The textile industry was a major contributor to the Dutch Golden Age, transforming the world in which Rembrandt lived. During this time, as I have hoped to prove here, Dutch women's dress was a visual manifestation of religious and social sentiment, of which Rembrandt was exposed to daily. All of which shaped Rembrandt and so his Art.