Introduction

While the positive influences of the Reformation have long been considered as limited to the development of a visual tradition in early Protestantism, Rembrandt’s *The Apostle Paul* in its contemporary setting offers the opportunity for further examining the “inner quality” of Protestant aesthetics in a new way.¹ Rembrandt van Rijn’s (1606-1669) *The Apostle Paul* (1657) and his other late religious portraits are well known for their deep “humanity” (Fig.1).² Rembrandt’s apostles, as Arthur Wheelock argues, have “Protestant quality” in their humility.³ Through referencing the apostle’s association to the Biblical text and church tradition, Volker Manuth examines the historical importance and artistic reception of apostles in varieties of representations.⁴ Building upon Wheelock and Manuth’s research on Rembrandt’s apostle series from the lens of Protestantism, this paper asks the question: How does Rembrandt’s *The Apostle Paul* convey theological expression? I will demonstrate that visual effect in Rembrandt’s *The Apostle Paul* can shed light on the viewer’s understanding of Protestant imagination.
The Spatial Dimension

*The Apostle Paul* is dynamic in its composition, simply composed of the image of a bearded old man with two-thirds length body against a plain wall. Yet, the left shoulder and lower part of the figure are ambiguously hidden in deep darkness. This unusual, inscrutable, dim darkness in composition attracts our eyes and serves as a gateway, invoking silently the viewer’s memory of an unknown “universe.” The depth of darkness reveals itself in specific details. The vague edge between the figure’s body and setting is located in the center point of the painting, suggesting that the viewer penetrate into the sitter’s activity of meditation. This is a painting with the reduction of multi-colorful layers. Brown is the major tone and gives a sense of stable unity to the work. All this richness of subtle colored layers contributes to the depth of the pictorial space. The sense of wholeness hidden in the illumination of the figure’s facial expression dominates the focal point of the painting. The economical brush strokes and fresh tones in a single layer over a warm primary layer also contribute to the painting’s unity. In this later portrait Rembrandt creates the structure of an inner space rather than focusing on specifics of external detailed setting.

The similar scholarly ethos of simplicity in Rembrandt’s representation of St. Paul can be traced back in his etched series of portraits of religious leaders. In *Cornelis Claesz Anslo* (1641) (Fig. 2), a wealthy Mennonite merchant and preacher is depicted as a scholar demonstrating not only the social status and virtuous character but also the quest for
understanding the Holy Scriptures. This secular portrait of a contemporary theologian in the
seventeenth century gives us a clue as how to interpret a human’s encounter with divine in
the iconography of Rembrandt’s saints and apostles. Rembrandt animates the likeness of the
portrait by giving the sitter an active posture with turned head that appears to address an
unseen audience. Searching for the truth of the Scriptures continually reflects Rembrandt’s
interest in the inner qualities in his portraits of religious figures. In The Apostle Paul, the
spatial dynamic, the light and the painterly effects contribute to an ambiguous space that
invokes the viewer’s imagination to engage in the figure’s meditation. In noting this, the
viewer has begun to engage in the same activity.

Symbols and Narrations

While examining the iconographic meaning of Rembrandt's representation of St. Paul, the pictorial tradition of the portrait histories should not be neglected. The artist’s
representation of the Apostle Paul as a single figure in the guise of a historical character
invites the viewer into a biblical narrative in a contemporary setting. It becomes hard to tell
whether the single figure in The Apostle Paul is a historical painting or a portrait of a real
person portrayed from life. Rembrandt depicts this biblical character in such an
individualized way that the quality of likeness is found in the viewer’s encountering
experience of the portrait. The “portrait-like” genre erases the borderlines between the
portrayal of a portrait and an historical event.\textsuperscript{10}

The 1627 representation of \textit{Saint Paul in Prison} (Fig. 3) offers an example for our understanding of the historical depiction of St. Paul in Rembrandt’s iconographical evolution.\textsuperscript{11} The full-length apostle with white hair and long beard sits on a bed and sunk in thought in his prison cell. The bright light coming from the window of the left hand side seems to illuminate the apostle’s mind and soul in his hardship.\textsuperscript{12} Through the most direct testimony from many of his Epistles written in the prison, Paul becomes the one whose personal character and history is known most among the Protestant world.\textsuperscript{13} The portrayal of the individual figure becomes a historical painting, albeit the event of meditating that the figure involves is in purely internal in nature.\textsuperscript{14}

Rembrandt’s 1657 Washington painting reveals how the historical event takes place reaching its culmination in a selected moment of quietness. It is not the artist’s intention in his Apostle Paul to immortalize the figure by means of the suppression of specific time and space of the narrative. Instead, the saint as an individual in the contemporary setting gives the pictorial scene the sense of timelessness that overcomes the bounds of time.\textsuperscript{15} The apostle’s attributions of book and sword are portrayed naturally as ordinary objects in the present age. Paul sits in an isolated setting of simplicity. A sincere, quiet feeling of the present permeates the pictorial scene. The apostle at half-length rather than full-length allows the viewer to experience intimacy with the saint.
Rembrandt’s psychological characterization of the apostle reflects the struggles and anxieties of the saint that could be further articulated through the comparison with *Apostle Paul* (1610) (Fig. 4) by Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640). As a heroic figure, Rubens’ St. Paul offers a fascinating contrast with Rembrandt’s representation. Being a Catholic artist during the Counter-Reformation, Rubens uses classical ideas from antiquity and the Renaissance to portray the Apostle Paul as a physically powerful man endowed with the wisdom of ancient philosophers.16 The illuminated face of the elderly apostle turns to the viewer in the darkness. Paul’s gaze stares out at the viewer confidently. His right hand firmly holds a sword of martyrdom and thick Epistles in the other. The composition as a stable triangle conveys to the viewer a sense of spiritual authority. Rubens’ representation of *Apostle Paul* as an intercessor standing between the human and divine expresses an important theological thought of the Counter-Reformation.17

Rubens’ representation of an idealized apostle with proper decorum echoes the teaching on the depiction of the saint from Gabriele Paleotti, the archbishop of Bologna. In his article “On Portraits of Saints,” Paleotti warns that the great care should be used in choosing which person should be portrayed, so that they will be true saints approved by the universal consensus of the holy church. They should be portrayed with the image they had in life, the typically good and intelligent person.18 The face of the saint should not be recognized as particular to an individual, instead, the generalized feature of the goodness of
the saints is encouraged. In Rubens’ representation, the face of the saint is depicted with the
nobility and dignity of kingship. Rembrandt’s representation of the apostle’s face, ironically,
is depicted in an opposite way. Rembrandt’s saint is not a king of authority. Instead,
Rembrandt’s apostle Paul is a human being with a doubtful mind, humbly pondering the
Word of God. The recognized face of the particular individual characterizes the feature of
this portrait-like painting. The naturalism of the facial depiction in Rembrandt’s apostle
echoes the sinful nature of human being and the grace of God in Paul’s divine message.

The Man of Grace

As Wheelock explains, Rembrandt’s interpretation of “Christian decorum” owed
much to the preaching of St. Paul in his First Epistle to the Corinthians (1:27): “But the
foolish things of the world had God chosen, that he may confound the wise; and the weak
things of the world hath God chosen, that he may confound the strong.” Paul’s message can
be read in the context of Rembrandt’s Protestant world where the lowest one would become
strong by God’s grace. The splendor of God’s majesty is hidden in the simplicity and
weakness of men. The apostle’s humanity with divinity interlaces the material and spiritual
world, inviting the viewer into a space of sacredness.

John Calvin’s commentary on the Book of Psalms illuminates our theological
imagination of the image of human being based on the rich narratives in the Scriptural world.
The human being as image of glory and honor is interpreted clearly in Calvin’s commentary on Psalms 8:5-6: “For thou hast made him little lower than God, and hast crowned him with glory and honor, Thou hast set him over the works of your hands. Thou hast put all things under his feet.” Calvin has no doubt that “men were formed by the image of God, and created to the hope of a blessed and immortal life.” The human as image of God inherited all the goodness of God’s truth and grace. Due to the sinful nature of human beings, however, they can no longer enjoy the goodness of God’s creation. The intimate relationship between people and God has been disrupted, and the world now feels alien. Although human beings live in the consequence of this corruption, Calvin asserts that human beings can draw from the fountain of Christ with “immeasurable fullness of all blessings.” Through Christ, “the faithful recover what they had lost in Adam.” Rembrandt’s representation of Paul as an individual in meditation encourages the viewer, to imagine God’s presence within oneself. By drawing a picture in one’s mind where God dwells within, the viewer allows the imagery of Scripture to work on one’s imagination.

We can see that Paul’s teaching and his labor for God’s kingdom is central to Calvin’s Dutch Protestantism. Paul’s messages of hope and resurrection remain central to the Reformed church and are important sources in developing Reformed theology. Justification by faith shapes Protestant aesthetics concerning human’s identity until today. The figure in Rembrandt’s *Apostle Paul* is the man of grace who knows who he is—a sinner who
Su-Chi Lin

constantly lives in the light of redemption. Pauline theology emphasizes humanity’s sinful nature that needs God’s mercy through trusting God in faith. The faithful open the eyes of their minds in order to see their lives as part of the story of salvation. Rembrandt’s image of Paul helps viewers to understand the Reformed vision of humans as both human and divine in a unique way. God’s grace and redemption are not merely present in the external form and place but, most importantly, within the interiority of our innermost beings.  

Conclusion

The quality of humanity makes Rembrandt’s portraits of saints extremely individual. The image of the saint comes alive to interact with the viewer; what is temporal and fragile in the present yet divine in the eternity. Rembrandt’s visual interpretation of the biblical text is associated with the image of the apostle in Protestant tradition where the boundaries between portraits of men and historical paintings of the saints are blurred. *The Apostle Paul* negotiates the relationships between human and divine, revealing the nature of human beings as both sinful and spiritual. This also reflects the teaching of Pauline theology of redemption and grace that humanity is justified by faith, not by works. The man of grace revealed in Rembrandt’s *The Apostle Paul* confronts not only Dutch Protestantism in the seventeenth century, but also the viewer in the context of the twenty-first century.

Rembrandt’s portraits of individuals as saints become the medium of revelation and interact
with, touch and speak to the viewer today.

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Illustrations

Fig. 1, Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Apostle Paul*, 1657, oil on canvas, 51.1 x 41.1 inches, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection
Fig. 2, Rembrandt van Rijn, *Cornelis Claesz Anslo*, 1641, etching, 2.8 x 2.4 inches, First State, Paris, Loivre
Fig. 3, Rembrandt van Rijn, *Saint Paul in Prison*, 1627, oil on panel, 28.7 x 23.7 inches, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart
Fig. 4, Sir Peter Paul Rubens, *Apostle Paul*, 1610, oil on panel, 42.1 x 32.2 inches, Museo Del Prado, Madrid
1 The “inward turn” has been categorized as one of the tendencies in developing Protestant imagination by William Dyrness. William Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture: The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards* (New York: Cambridge Press, 2004), 306.


3 For a discussion of “Protestant quality,” see Larry Silver’s review of *Rembrandt’s Late Religious Portrait* by University of Pennsylvania Press. The reception of Protestant quality in Rembrandt’s art is emphasized by Ann Jensen Adams. See review of *Rembrandt’s Late Religious Portraits. Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 60, no.1 (Spring 2007): 246-248. Protestant theologians, such as Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli, have their different opinions regarding the restrictive usage of image in religious life. The overall concern among the reformers is that the images be distinguishable from idols. True piety relies on the power of the Word of God rather than the image.

4 The continued significance to Protestants of the apostles is discussed by Manuth in *Rembrandt’s Late Religious Portraits*. Manuth suggests that one of the most important Christian texts is the Apostles’ Creed (*symbolum apostolicum*) that highlights the fundamental dogma of the Christian faith. See Wheelock and Sutton, *Rembrandt’s Late Religious Portraits*, 43.

5 Rembrandt’s late religious portraits express “a whole universe” simply by rendering the image of man without employing the differentiated means of complex composition. The analogy between Rembrandt’s late religious portraits and the universe is discussed by Otto Benesch in his article “Worldly and Religious Portraits in Rembrandt’s Late Art.” Benesch ed., *Otto Benesch Collected Writing, Volume I. Rembrandt*, 191.

6 William Dyrness argues that the so-called secular portrait influenced by Calvinism has its religious dimension. On the discussion of the relation between portraiture and the Reformation, see Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture*, 306.


8 The definition of portrait historie: The depiction of known individuals in the guise of biblical, mythological, or literary personages. See Sutton’s article, “Rembrandt and Portrait Historie” in Wheelock and Sutton, *Rembrandt’s Late Religious Portraits*, 58.

9 Otto Benesch inclines to assume that this is the same model which Rembrandt used for the Aristotle appears in two portraits. One is the so-called Rabbi, *A bearded Man in a Cap* dated 165[7], in the National

10 Jan Bialostocki, “A New Look at Rembrandt’s Iconography,” Artibus et Historiae, Vol. 5, no. 10 (1984), 9. For the explanation of the traditional iconographic categories that disappears in Rembrandt’s late works, see Jan Bialostocki’s discussion of the problem in Rembrandt’s iconography. He concludes that “all the symbolic and historic themes, all the allegoric and emblematic features come to produce an art expressing sincere, deeply felt human experience. The borderlines between the traditional iconographic categories disappear.” On the ambiguity between the depiction of an event and a portrait, see Michael Bockemuhl, Rembrandt 1606-1669: The Mystery of the Revealed Form (Cologne: Taschen, 2014), 45.

11 On Rembrandt’s iconography evolution, Bialostocki modifies his initial conception that Rembrandt’s works are concerned more with human existence than concrete theme. He accepts Christian Tumpel’s assertion that Rembrandt made use of iconographic tradition very well. Bialostocki, “A New Look at Rembrandt’s Iconography,” 10.

12 Chapman H. Perry asserts that the letter explains Paul’s mission and reason for writing in Ephesians 3:4, 7-9. “I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all the Lord’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.” (Eph. 3:7-9, NIV) In prison, Paul wrote messages of grace and redemption that became the fundamental truth in Protestant theology.


14 Bockemuhl, Rembrandt 1606-1669, 28.

15 For a discussion of how Rembrandt’s structural conception gives the quality of a temporal event, see Bockemuhl, Rembrandt 1606-1669, 59.

16 Wheelock commands Molanus’ thought that Rubens takes the models of heroes from antiquity, including Hercules. We see a philosopher-like man with spiritual wisdom dressed in noble robes. See Wheelock and Sutton, Rembrandt’s Late Religious Portraits, 31.

17 Wheelock and Sutton, Rembrandt’s Late Religious Portraits, 32.

18 In terms of the likeness of particular individuals, Paleotti wrote, “but saints should never, ever be portrayed with the faces of particular individuals, or worldly folk, or someone whom others would recognize, because it not only would be vain and utterly undignified to do so, the result would be like a king sitting on his throne in majesty wearing the mask of some charlatan or other ignoble person well known to the crowd as an entirely private individual, such that whoever saw it would immediately laugh.” The warning on the likeness of the portrait of the saint is eloquently addressed. Gabriele Paleotti, Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images, trans. William McCuaig (1582) (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2012), 214.

19 Wheelock and Sutton, Rembrandt’s Late Religious Portraits, 33.

20 On verse 5, Calvin comments that the infinite goodness of God towards men can be explained in
two aspects: The representation of men as adorned with honors that are close to divine, and the external power which men possess over all creatures that is not far removed from the splendor of divine majesty. The NIV biblical translation refers to humans being made a little lower than the angels (v5). John Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms Vol 1*, trans. Arthur Golding (1571) and ed. James Anderson (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing company 1948), 102.

21 According to the Genesis creation story (Gen 1, 2), God made the heaven and the earth, the day and the night, in order for human beings to enjoy the goodness and beauty of God’s creation: “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.”(Gen 1:31a, NRSV). Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms Vol 1*, 102.

22 “From a state of the highest excellence, we were reduced to a condition of wretched and shameful destitution.” Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 104.

23 Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 106.

24 As Paul wrote in the Book of Romans: “But by the Grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.” (Romans 15: 10, NIV)

25 Since the external image is forbidden, the faithful turns inward to shape their images of God. On “inward turn” in Protestant Aesthetics, see Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture*, 304.