

Rembrandt's Tree

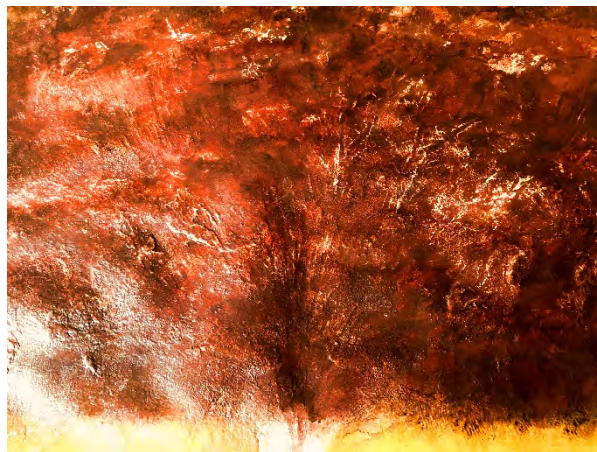
Robin Richmond, April 30, 2021



The Jewish Bride. Rembrandt van Rijn c. 1665-9



St Lucy, origins unknown



Rembrandt's Tree. Robin Richmond

Sometimes I think that every painting that I make as an adult is a faint but distinct echo of a painting hanging on the walls of my childhood home. My parents were insatiable aesthetes and collectors of art. Much of their collection was bought in the forties, in Rome after the war, when they lived on my father's GI bill of rights stipend. They used to say that you could pick up antiquities in the junk shops on the Via dei Coronari for the price of a plate of pasta. Hyperbole perhaps, but their acquisitions were often quite fabulous. Old paintings, Roman bottles, leather screens, Etruscan figurines, headless saints, Stefano della Bella etchings, ecclesiastical bits and bobs, fragments of fresco - all in all a real pick and mix of history and high culture.

But not everything they bought on their shoestring budget was original. Clearly enamoured of Alessandro Filipepi, otherwise known as Botticelli, they somewhere acquired a very, very bad reproduction of a Botticelli princeling. This young man glowered over my cot, my childhood bed and even followed me to my bedsit in Chelsea when I was an art student. It is such a frighteningly bad reproduction that his skin is a metallic green like a cheap copper pot left too long in the rain. I think my slight aversion to Botticelli goes back to this abomination. But having it hang over my bed reminded me of home. Of Rome. Of the power of art.

Even if it's art you sort of hate.

I did love his red hat.

I still own it. It's been sequestered somewhere in my studio rack for years. It frightened my children as much as it did me, but I can't seem to throw it away as it is too freighted with meaning. Even hidden away it resonates in my head. I have a complete memory of it. By my bed now, I have another family heirloom. It's a mediocre fragment of a painting on wood of a lady saint with a hairy tail that my parents must have picked up in a junk shop on their travels. The tail always bothered me as a child. And the painting is probably a fake. But I love this particular painting unequivocally. It hung in the dining room in New England when I was tiny, and she followed us to Rome in 1961. I inherited her when my parents died. Of course, as a proper art historian I know that she is probably Saint Lucy - Santa Lucia - patron saint of the blind. I still very much like to think that she had a tail.

It wasn't all Renaissance art. Modernism was well represented in my childhood home. My mother was a still life painter in the manner of Georges Braque. Her painting professor had studied painting with Paul Klee at the Bauhaus, giving me, who was already saying I wanted to be a painter, a very thrilling degree of separation for me from the Master. Minor works from the New York school hung on the family walls next to her own Cubist paintings, communing with chairs by Ray and Charles Eames and ecclesiastical stools from 18th century Palermitano churches. "Don't sit on that chair!" was the perennial cry of my childhood. Form and function, firm tenets of the Bauhaus, were not always followed at home.

But the greatest gift that my parents gave me as an artist was a reproduction of a Rembrandt. The original is in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, and it is my desert island painting. I've written about it before. It has been known since the 19th century as *The Jewish Bride* and it is a late Rembrandt created in the greatest years of his artistic life. His brush marks are thick, loose and almost wild. The canvas looks like battered old leather. Like my crazy new painting of the tree.

The painfulness of Rembrandt's bankruptcy was to give him his richest period of introspection and psychological depth. I have never stopped loving the *Jewish Bride* and I visit it as often as I can, and as always, stand far too close to it, confusing and confounding my fellow museum-goers by my nose to canvas attention to its textures. The red of Rebecca's gown glows like rubies. Like a Byzantine crown. Like a Rothko.

Finished around 1667, the *Jewish Bride* was probably painted just two years before Rembrandt's death, and it depicts an older man and a young woman in an intimate, domestic situation and it is most likely to be a commemorative marriage painting. We don't know the identities of the sitters. The older man places a tender, possessive hand on his young bride's breast in a graceful ballet of three hands. They are dressed in fine oriental robes, painted with the gestural, expressionist freedom that we associate with the late Rembrandt, who loved religious themes from the Bible. The iconography alludes to the story of the 40-year-old Isaac and his young wife Rebecca, who waited 20 years to have a child, and the painting is the very embodiment of patience, tenderness and love. It's just unbelievably wonderful. But what strikes me most as a painter these days is oddly not the depth of emotion. For me now, in this pandemic year, bereft of the life of the museum - a loss which I often write about - it's actually the rich textures, the freedom of the brush marks, the sensuality of the clothes, the saturated colours, the ruby red and the glowing amber, the opulence of the fabrics, the pictorial depth and the leathery scumble of paint that thrill me the most. And inspire. And encourage.

A reproduction of this painting has always hung on my studio wall - beside me all my painting life. My new paintings during this last terrible year have taken their theme from nature. Landscape. Trees and trees and more trees. Old trees. New trees. Fruit trees. Bare trees. Scary trees. Comforting trees. Ghost trees. Yellow trees. Deep red trees. Yellow trees. Baby trees. Grandfather trees. My trees. Now I see today that they are Rembrandt trees.