Rembrandt’s Secret
Zhenya Gershman, Project AWE

There are many mysteries surrounding Rembrandt’s life. Many of his subjects remain in question. Rembrandt himself seemed either not to be concerned or was purposefully cautious about leaving any written document about his life or artistic practice. Paradoxically, he left more autobiographical paintings than any artist of his time, including over seventy self-portraits.

In addition, Rembrandt used his signature as another method of self-insertion—when signed, his presence was always proudly asserted. Over the years, he continually revised and honed a particular way of signing his work. By 1632, he had dropped all of the auxiliary information such as his hometown, his last name, and the reference to his father to focus primarily on what makes him unique, which he represented with his first name alone. Let us begin our investigation into Rembrandt’s secret with an examination of his signature.

1. “d” for . . . ?

Sometime in the early 1630s (probably around 1633), Rembrandt made a significant change to his identity that, mysteriously, remained uncommented upon by his contemporaries. For some reason, he added a letter “d” to his first name, changing Rembrant to Rembrandt. Despite the large number of paintings and etchings signed with this modified first name, most of the documents that mention him during his lifetime retain the original “Rembrant” spelling. While scholars have noted the change in the spelling of Rembrandt’s name, they have not offered an explanation to account for it. By adding the extra letter, though not making a phonetic change, the meaning of the word was altered. The name can be divided into two distinct words: “Rem” and “brandt” (in a number of his signatures after 1632, Rembrandt emphasized this duality by either capitalizing the letter “B” in the middle of his name or literally separating the word into two: Rem brandt). In Dutch, “Rem” stands for “brake” (or “obstruct”) and “brandt” translates as “fire” (or “light”). The combination of these two words “rem” and “brandt” creates a wordplay that means “obstructed light.” In fact, whenever Rembrandt’s name is mentioned, one of the first associations with his art is the mastery of light and dark. The radiant light that illuminates his canvases, panels, paper, and copper prints, is accentuated by rich, dense, and velvety areas of darkness or obscurity. Thus, Rembrandt’s revised name becomes a pun reflecting the quintessential ability of creating illuminated darkness or “dimmed light.”

1. the three point brother . .

Rembrandt repeatedly added a beautifully rendered letter “f” after signing his name. Scholars have interpreted this to mean “fecit” or “made by.” A master of multiple meanings, Rembrandt enjoyed the potential of this letter to also evoke the word “frater” or “brother.” Thus his signature would be read as “Rembrandt, fraternally,” or “Rembrandt, brother,” implying his belonging to a closed fraternal society. Additionally, Rembrandt punctuated the letter “f” with three mysterious dots.
Albert C. Mackey, in his Encyclopedia of Freemasonry and its Kindred Sciences, recorded: “Abbreviations of technical terms or of official titles are of very extensive use in Freemasonry. . . . A Masonic abbreviation is distinguished by three points . . . in a triangular form following the letter.” It was a unique form of coded communication by which one Freemason signaled to other Brothers. Mackey goes through the list of known abbreviations in which “f” stands proudly for “Brother,” as can be seen in a document from Grande Lodge of France. Jacques Huyghebaert in “Three Points in Masonic Context” specifies that this triple punctuation “also appeared in signatures, which explains why Freemasons are still called in French: ‘Les Frères Trois Points.’” Looking at a great number of Rembrandt’s signatures, three dots in a triangular pattern can indeed be visible following the letter “f.” This type of public display that nonetheless remained invisible to the uninitiated seemed to appeal to Rembrandt, and we will see it again with his approach to self-portraits as well as the encoding of his name within the artwork.

What was the impetus behind Rembrandt’s obsession with creating the illusion of illumination? We must go beyond the subject of light in art typically associated with the innovations by Renaissance masters such as Leonardo and Titian, culminating in the technical virtuosity of chiaroscuro technique of light and dark in Caravaggio. What lies beyond the visual illusionism of dark backgrounds accentuating luminous characters which seem to break free from the two-dimensional surface? Light has been used as a visual symbol of divinity, spirituality, creativity, knowledge, truth, purification, and birth across time and in cultures like those of ancient Egypt and Greece, as well as in Judeo-Christian traditions. There is another important scheme of thought that should be explored in connection with chiaroscuro: inspired both by kabalistic and Christian symbolism, light is of great importance in Masonic rituals. Among its numerous and reach symbolic meanings, it represents the divine truth and is believed to be a guiding principle that points the way for one’s life pilgrimage. No wonder that Goethe, a brilliant writer as well as a Freemason, is believed to have uttered “Mehr Licht” (more light) as he was dying. In contrast, Goethe’s famous line from Götz von Berlichingen, Act I (1773) states: “There is strong shadow where there is much light.”

Naturally there can be no light without darkness. The shadow, or obscurity, serves as an important stage for the backdrop of illumination. Masonic rituals include significant references and experiences of light and dark. In Masonic images, moreover, this duality is often represented by black-and-white checkered floors. Rather than merely following in the footsteps of the Caravaggisti, who were imitating the rapidly spreading contagious formula of extreme chiaroscuro, Rembrandt was contemplating the symbolism and mysteries of the necessary polarities beyond the technique. Consequently, was the self-imposed silent letter “d” in his first name added to signify the extremes of light and dark, a hint for the initiated?

3. “know thyself”

Just as in his preoccupation with light and dark, Rembrandt’s ongoing practice of self-portraiture is also akin to the Masonic philosophy of self-realization. Unlike most organized groups, Freemasons strive for the cultivation of individuality rather than adjusting to fit in with the preexistent structure. Each member’s task is to cultivate and “polish” oneself, a process akin to polishing a rough stone to smooth perfection. This undertaking involves not only striving to perfect oneself and thus
realizing full potential, but understanding one’s personal limitations. The concept of initiating change in the world by changing oneself is at the basis of the Masonic way of life.

No wonder Masonic philosophy appealed to such great and independent minds as Voltaire, Mozart, and Goethe. Few painters have practiced the task of scrupulous self-examination as much as did Rembrandt. In just four years, between 1627 and 1631, he portrayed himself at least 20 times. He painted, etched, and drew his own likeness at least 75 times over 40 years in an astonishing number of roles, ranging from a street beggar to the Apostle Paul. Over time, one can observe the pretenses of an aspiring court painter being stripped away from the aging artist, allowing a more private and vulnerable self to come forward. This impulse of self-examination has been variously interpreted—as the practice of the humanistic tradition, as vanity, or a self-marketing tool, or even as a response to actors’ exercises. However, it is important to consider Rembrandt’s extraordinary contribution to self-portraiture in a new light, as it bears strong resemblance to the Masonic task of ongoing self-examination.

4. Are you looking at me?

What lies beyond the face in Rembrandt’s self-portraits? There are often multiple metaphors in seventeenth-century Dutch painting. We know to look behind ordinary objects to read a deeper meaning or to take away a moral lesson. Gestures, clothes, backgrounds, poses, direction of gaze, and colors can all be indicative of a meaning that the artist is conveying to the viewer. Unfortunately, over time, these messages frequently are misread or overlooked. Often, myths attach themselves to paintings over the centuries. The heart of the matter, however, usually lies in a deceptively basic observation of the work of art. Let’s take a closer look at Rembrandt’s Self-portrait (1636–38), now in the Norton Simon Museum. At first glance it’s a rather traditional bust-length portrait. Rembrandt portrays himself in a master’s beret, with a penetrating gaze, which can be said to be either examining the viewer or, in contrast, drilling through his own image in the mirror. One barely detects the hint of a hand hidden in the lapel of the jacket. The chiaroscuro effect illuminates the face, inviting the viewer to scrutinize the persona as it obscures the hand gesture, making it easily unnoticeable. Remember that it is from the dark that knowledge is born. This gesture may look familiar. Compare Rembrandt’s self-portrait (either the painting or a related etching from 1638) to a portrait of George Washington from 1776 by Charles Willson Peale. The gesture is identical. In the case of Washington (who was a Freemason), we know exactly what it represents. The “hidden hand” is found in the rituals of the Royal Arch Degree of Freemasonry and communicates Masonic membership to other initiates. The hidden fingers also represent an internal disposition of faith illustrated by the Masonic diagram of this concept. Is the hiding of the hand in Rembrandt’s self-portrait actually a way of revealing an important message?

5. Written in stone . . .

Rembrandt’s preoccupation with self-examination spills over to his unorthodox treatment of the signature. His signatures go beyond the basic purpose of claiming authorship and can be seen as an extension of self-representation or self-insertion. Most often the placement of his signature deliberately directs the viewer’s attention to the key aspects in his work. In addition, Rembrandt insistently adds his name to stone surfaces, for example, at the base of a column in the painting of Samson Threatened his Father-in-law, and in the rough stone in The Abduction of Europa. In Masonic ritual and legend, stone
(as one might expect) plays a leading role. Beginning with the new apprentice, who is entrusted with polishing the rough stone with hammer and chisel, and culminating in the variously shaped stones appearing in the Master Mason Degree, there is hardly a ceremony in freemasonry that is not connected in some way with stone. It is noteworthy that after completion of the initiation ceremony, the new Brother is placed in a particular position within the Lodge and is usually told that he represents the cornerstone on which freemasonry’s spiritual Temple must be built. Additionally, when joining Royal Arch Masonry, the initiated is asked to create a signature “mark” which serves as a personal identifier carved into stone. On numerous occasions, Rembrandt places the signature in his paintings as if written on stone for the viewer to ponder. It is important to acknowledge this deliberate choice, which goes beyond utilitarian use of the signature for identification purposes of the artist’s work.

6. open sesame . . .

Another type of authorship can be seen in the form of “I”-witness in Rembrandt’s famous Danaë. This masterpiece marks one of the first instances in which the artist presents himself in the act of creation within the depiction of a mythological scene. In the background, one can actually detect Rembrandt, wearing his signature beret and holding brushes and a palette perpendicular to his body, suggesting that the paint is still wet. It is surprising enough to discover Rembrandt inserting himself into a mythological painting as both the creator and a witness of the scene. Even more intriguing is the combination of the artist’s tools of the trade he is holding in his right arm—the palette and brushes together with the keys. There is no literal door to be opened in this painting. Rather, these keys are suggestive of an intellectual and perhaps a spiritual door that can be opened by and for the viewer. Setting the obvious story aside, the myth of Danaë is also an allegory of the boundless reach of divinity. While Danaë is locked away in a tower, God/Jupiter finds a devious way of entering the room in the form of a golden shower (in Rembrandt’s interpretation this is represented by a golden luminous stream of light invading the scene from above). The keys traditionally symbolize a means by which secrets are obtained. Here we are invited by the artist to enter the sanctum sanctorum along with the divinity. Once again, we encounter an essential code in Freemasonry: the key as a symbol for unlocking the truth. One more hint to consider. The shackled cupid in the background of the painting has served as a source of debate. The accepted interpretation was made by Erwin Panofsky, who claimed that it represented Danaë’s chastity (though hard to reconcile with Danaë’s welcoming attitude towards the intrusion). It is interesting to observe what happens if we continue to apply a Masonic lens. As pointed out by Charles Clyde Hunt in his book *Masonic Symbolism*, to Freemasons, Cupid represents secrecy, based on the idea that love should be practiced in private. By adding handcuffs to Cupid, the symbol of privacy, is Rembrandt implying that secret knowledge is being exposed publicly? As viewers we are observing a nude woman on whom, according to the myth, no one was to cast eyes. Simultaneously, are we becoming privy to sacred and secret Masonic symbols (i.e., the key, the streaming light, the proximity of the artist to God as creator) that have been embedded by the artist? Is Danaë the center of this drama or is Rembrandt placing a seductive woman here as a distraction from another meaning?
Rembrandt had various sources for his esoteric quest. One of them was his fascinating involvement with Menasseh Ben Israel, or Manoel Dias Soeiro, who was a Portuguese rabbi, cabalist, scholar, writer, printer, publisher, and founder of the Hebrew printing press in Amsterdam in 1626. Rembrandt borrowed concepts from the kabala for numerous paintings and prints, and it is speculated that he had access to esoteric symbols through Ben Israel. There was more evident collaboration when Ben Israel commissioned Rembrandt to create four illustrations for his publication Piedra Gloriosa (Glorious Rock)—David and Goliath, Daniel’s Vision of Four Beasts, Jacob’s Ladder, and The Image Seen by Nebuchadnezzar, published in 1655. In combination, we have the glorified rock (the subject of this volume and one of the most important symbols for Freemasons), the borrowing from the kabala, and the geometric solution that is used to represent the relationship between God and men. All four images are strongly indicative of Masonic preoccupations. Specifically, I would like to focus attention on Daniel’s Vision. Here we ought to look for: (1) concentric circles surrounding the divine figure at the top; and (2) a compass shape spreading from the oculus, a symbol of divinity, pointing down to the Earth. These two geometric applications are closely reminiscent of a key Masonic concept describing God as The Great Architect. The basic tools of measurement, a pair of compasses and the square, are considered the main two symbols of sacred geometry. Further, the circle as a product of the compass becomes a symbol of the divine and the creative. It is noteworthy that the compass lines radiating from the oculus and the God figure at the top reach all the way to the ground to touch Rembrandt’s signature. Rembrandt thus underlines the connection between the two creators in this image—God and the Artist. It is also fascinating that when the book was reprinted a different artist was commissioned (most likely unbeknownst to Ben Israel) to copy Rembrandt’s etchings. While Daniel’s Vision was replicated, it was altered by deleting the image of God and the compass lines. Was Rembrandt’s visual solution too controversial?

Going a step further, Rembrandt’s famous print The Alchemist (c. 1652), which has been ascribed various titles (including Faust), is even more daring. It presents a visual riddle based on a synthesis of three sources: Christianity, Kabala, and Alchemy. A man draped in what appears to be a tallit (a Jewish prayer shawl) rises and turns towards the window. A radiating disk surrounded by three concentric circles appears in mid-air, obscuring a figure holding and pointing into a mirror. This levitating vision bears a secret inscription, which has been de-coded by using a mirror and deciphering the Latin anagram to read as Hebrew words that spell the name of God. The middle of the roundel bears a cross dividing it into four sections with the letters INRI (from New Testament: Iesus Nazarenus, Rex Iudaeorum or Jesus Christ, King of the Jews). However, Rembrandt rotated the letters thus emphasizing the “R” residing prominently at the top, spelling RIIN clockwise. Riin is an equivalent way to notate Rembrandt’s last name Rijn, since in Dutch the capital letters “I” and “J” can be written identically. Rembrandt also added a clever and daring spin to the abbreviation of the letter “R” from Rex (or King), identifying himself by either first or last name: “R” for Rembrandt or “R” for “Rijn.” In alchemy and according to the kabala, the mirror reflects the image of God. The world can be seen as God’s mirror. As we have seen, Rembrandt was intimately acquainted with the mirror through countless self-portraits. His work can be seen as an extension of another mirror in reflecting both Rembrandt and the Divine.
Once again, Rembrandt imbeds his presence while also aligning the artist with the carrier of light and secret knowledge. The presence of the skull, globe, books, and the mysterious writing embedded in the roundel of the apparition has led scholars to see the scene as the vision of the alchemist. Consider a new striking juxtaposition. Compare the Rosicrucian Cross (also prevalent in Masonic symbolism) to Rembrandt’s image of the vision—you will find the three concentric circles, the cross in the middle, Hebrew letters spelling God, and the letters INRI.

In People of the Book: *Christian Identity and Literary Culture*, David Lyle Jeffrey stresses that Goethe, as a Freemason, had a particular interest in a print by Rembrandt. In fact, Goethe went so far as to obtain “a reproduction, illustrating with it his 1790 first edition of Faust.” Jeffrey suspects that the Alchemist’s alternate title, *Doctor Faustus*, was probably inspired by this association. Further, Jeffrey concludes, “The light symbol which comes through the window does have significance for Freemasonry.” In addition to the Christian interpretation of the letters INRI signifying Christ, Jeffrey adds that “for Masons this came to signify rather *Igne Natura Renovatur Integra*—suggesting the sacred fire of Masonry that renews humankind naturalistically.” Goethe obviously saw something more than just a collectible item in this mysterious etching by Rembrandt.

Rembrandt had yet another source for esoteric knowledge. Thomas E. Rassieur, in his essay on Rembrandt’s printmaking techniques, mentions the artist’s “reuse [of] plates previously worked by other printmakers.” Out of the two known cases, Rassieur describes the first as Rembrandt’s “frugal recycling of an out-of-date mathematical diagram no longer having commercial value.” Fate has it that this copper plate survived and is now housed at the Rijksmuseum. It is on the verso of the plate for the famous 1636 *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Careful observation reveals a squaring-of-the-circle diagram. This mathematical problem has puzzled great minds, including Leonardo da Vinci, over centuries. Contemplation of this problem remains an important practice for Freemasons today, though since 1882 it has been proven to be an impossible task. For Freemasons one’s daily work includes the striving to comprehend the divine plan, with the understanding that such comprehension will never be possible. This paradox is reflected in the problem of the squaring of the circle. The goal is not to solve it, but to practice creative thinking. We know that Rembrandt spent an enormous amount of money on collecting other artists’ work. It is premature to jump to the conclusion that he may have purchased this plate out of frugality. Rather, it gave him yet another source for a timeless esoteric geometric problem that may have resonated with his creative and philosophical endeavors.

9. *the circle of trust*

Who would have appreciated such nuanced symbolism in Rembrandt’s time? It is noteworthy that his first known commission of 1625, *The Stoning of St. Stephen*, came from Petrus Scriverius (Peter Hendrickz Schrijver), a fascinating and politically controversial figure and a friend of Willem van Swanenburg (Rembrandt’s first teacher’s younger brother). A seventeenth century portrait engraving bears his name with an additional inscription “Lare Secreto” from the Latin for “Secret Home”. In describing Scriverius, a Rembrandt scholar Gary Schwartz writes: “His album is enriched with drawings by three Haarlem artists he called friends [including] the imprisoned leader of [the] Rosicrucian movement Johannes Torrentius.”
There was another link between Scriverius and Rembrandt—Joost van den Vondel, one of the greatest Dutch poets of the seventeenth century. There are a number of Rembrandt paintings that have been suspected of reflecting scenes from Vondel’s plays commissioned by Scriverius. One of which is Vondel’s 1639 play Gebroeders (Brothers), staged in 1641, and Rembrandt’s The reconciliation of David and Mephiboseth (1642). The main two subjects of the play and the painting are not brothers by blood but by compassion and conviction—a theme that would fit well with the Masonic Brotherhood. The inspiration worked both ways. Vondel’s famous lines were written in response to Rembrandt’s portrait of Cornelis Claesz Anso: “O, Rembrandt, paint Cornelis’ voice. The visible part is the least of him; the invisible is known only through the ears; he who would see Anso must hear him.” The subject of invisibility is described by David Stevenson: “Masons, as many of the seventeenth-century references to the Mason word indicate, were not what they seemed, in that outsiders could not see anything distinctive about them which identified them as masons, but fellow initiates could detect ‘invisible’ emanations which identified them.” Vondel, indeed, may have belonged to a secret group that would have preferred to stay invisible to the authorities. A seventeenth-century Rosicrucian caricature survives, etched by Pieter Nolpe, with a verse below the image mentioning “a meeting of the brotherhood of the Red Cross”. In this print, the clothing of two figures is decorated with a cross. And among those whose identities are suggested—Joost van den Vondel and Torrentius. Though Holland was considered to be tolerant to the outsiders, in Rembrandt’s time one could still risk being jailed or even tortured for belonging to an unsanctioned organization. Consider the example of the Torrentius whose paintings were ordered to be burned, after he was accused of being a Rosicrucian, arrested (in 1627), and tortured in prison. In his article on Torrentius, George Taylor writes: “The connection between Rembrandt and the Order, although perhaps tenuous on the surface, is reinforced by The fact that in the foreground of the Nachtwacht, a red rose was originally painted, though Frans Banning Cocq (who commanded the Company in the painting) later replaced it with an orange on the copy in the British Museum. It can also be shown that the geometrical basis of the composition of the Nachtwacht is founded on the aforementioned Rosicrucian symbols.”

10. the secret agent . . .

Let’s consider one more suspect. It has been widely accepted that Rembrandt was introduced to the Dutch Court by Constantijn Huygens, who was a secretary to the two Princes of Orange. Huygens secured for Rembrandt a considerable number of commissions for the Prince’s gallery in

The Hague, including a five-part series of the Passion of Christ. Thus most art historians remark that Rembrandt’s career was made overnight in his early twenties. How and why the paths of a miller’s son and that of one of the most brilliant and erudite courtiers came to cross. It seems that this meeting was not accidental. The choice of Jacob Isaacsz Swanenburg as Rembrandt’s first painting teacher was not random; it was an attempt to establish connections at the court. Jacob’s cousin had married into Huygens’s family; it, then, was only a question of time for the exceptionally talented student to be introduced to the art connoisseur. Who was Huygens beyond his official court identity? Here are some illuminating facts:

1. One of Huygens’ friends and correspondents was the famous Freemason Christopher Wren.

2. Huygens collected rare treatises on Rosicrucianism and Kabalism.
3. He worked closely with operative Masons while designing his own house and contributing plans for the Mauritshuis in The Hague.

4. Huygens was known for frequently describing God as “the Great Architect.”

5. In 1661, his son Christiaan paid several visits in London to Sir Robert Moray, a Scottish soldier, statesman, diplo-mat, judge, spy, Freemason and philosopher.

6. Moray sealed his letters to both Huygenses, father and son, with a Masonic seal.

7. Visual evidence points to possible Masonic associations as well: in Huygens’ impressive portrait by Thomas Keyser, the artist portrays him at his desk with Huygens’s left hand prominently resting on a pair of compasses.

11. oh brother . . .

The Freemasons left behind tangible clues of their existence—predominantly in architecture. In the Netherlands, Jacob van Campen (1595–1657), an artist and an architect (and a friend of Constantijn Huygens), adopted Vitruvian principles (based on the work of Roman architect Marcus Vitruvius Pollio) to help design the Mauritshuis. To comprehend the importance of the Masonic implication, consider Stevenson’s evaluation: “Vitruvius’ concept of the architect was vital to the changing perceptions of the mason craft . . . which helped to lead to the emergence of freemasonry”; and again: “It would seem, then, that some men joined lodges through identifying masonry with Vitruvian concepts of architecture.” In addition, van Campen’s work was influenced by Christopher Wren, the English architect and Freemason, evidenced in the famous example of Nieuwe Kerk in Haarlem. Intriguingly, a Masonic Lodge under the name of Jacob van Campen was established in 1875 in Amersfoort (in the province of Utrecht) in honor of van Campen’s symbolic legacy in architecture. It is Van Campen who is credited with the redesign of Rembrandt’s house on Sint-Anthonisbreestraat around 1627–28. This addition included a new façade with a triangular pediment. A pediment including an oculus in the center is strongly evocative of Masonic architectural design. The delta triangle, which masons greatly revere, is a symbol of Freemasonry adopted from the Egyptians. Among its many profound meanings, it represents the presence of God as the Great Architect. Part of the importance of this symbol is that for the uninitiated it looks like an archetypal geometrical shape; but to the initiated, the sacred meaning is evident, for as Stevenson notes, “Playing the mason was being invisible.” This element in Rembrandt’s house provides an interesting comparison when seen side-by-side with Masonic architecture (such as the 1866 Masonic Lodge of Dublin and the 1895 Masonic Temple in Canada).

12. . . . who is there?

Our inquiry into the secret world of Rembrandt may not answer every question here and now. Rather, by opening an esoteric Masonic umbrella, it provides a novel way of looking at his work and life. Anyone can visit Rembrandt’s house today. You do not need a special key to open the front door; just present a ticket to enter what is now a museum. Inside one will find a reconstructed shelf in Rembrandt’s painting studio that boasts a beautiful pair of compasses, square, delta triangle with a circular opening.
and a skull. An entry awaits one prepared to use the key that Rembrandt left us through his work—are we ready to open that door?

Authors note: I would like to extend deep gratitude to those who encouraged and advised me throughout the research, writing, or editing process: Irina Gershman, George Gershman, Amy Golahny, Ineke Huysman, Harry Maslin, Evan Pepper, Christine Sellin, Paul R. Sellin, and John Slifko.