

PREFACE

The oil painting known as the 'Anatomy (or "Anatomy lesson") of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp', which is attributed on stylistic grounds to Rembrandt and dated 1632, hangs today in the Hague, as the cynosure of the Rembrandt collection in the Royal Cabinet of Paintings (Mauritshuis). The iconography of this one painting is the subject of the present essay. The argument of the essay is that this picture makes a cryptic but deliberate and precise statement about the nature of human life as revealed to the arts of anatomy, literature, metaphysics, and painting. From about 1675 to the present, according to the argument proposed here, although the picture has been much admired, studied, and reproduced, its original meaning has been completely forgotten.

If, as I claim, the picture's meaning was already lost in the seventeenth century, one might wonder how it could be recovered in 1982, the picture's 350th anniversary. I must admit at once that I have not discovered any hitherto unknown drawings, letters, or other documents which might reveal new facts about Rembrandt's painting. Although I do adduce some neglected circumstantial evidence, my argument is primarily a new hypothesis which accounts for the existence of documents already known. That this hypothesis is making its *début* only now, late in the picture's history, is due to the fact that, although much has been written in the past about Dutch seventeenth-century pictures, only recently has their iconography been studied for the first time. Some of this work has been done by former students of Professor William S. Heckscher, whose own iconographic study, *Rembrandt's anatomy of Dr. Nicolaas Tulp* (New York, 1958) has been especially useful for its magnificent bibliography, an indispensable adjunct to the present book. Then, the physical and chemical analysis of the painting which was made by Professor W. Froentjes and colleagues, and which was published by the Mauritshuis in 1978, was also of crucial importance: I believe the present essay is the first to exploit it. Dr. A. B. de Vries, Mr. L. A. Houthakker, and Mr. P. N. G. Pesch kindly sent me further valuable information from Renswoude, Amsterdam, and Utrecht.

In London, Dr. J. G. Bearn provided the necessary anatomical expertise, and facilities for testing the competing interpretations of the dissection shown in Rembrandt's painting. Indeed, it was his *obiter dictum* about that dissection that first stimulated the enquiries which ended in the present book. Dr. Bearn has kindly permitted me to write up our joint researches and to present them here as Appendix I (pp. 52–56 below).

My greatest debt, however, is to the Wellcome Institute, not only because this study is founded on books and pictures in its incomparable library, but also because of the help which I have received from fellow-members of the Institute's staff. The interest of Dr. C. H. Talbot encouraged me to persevere in this work when the seemingly insoluble problems of composition tempted me to abandon it less than half-written. The text was typed by Miss Stella Coomber; improved by the criticism of Dr. R. Burgess, Dr. E. Clarke, Dr. V. Nutton, and Professor A. R. Hall; much retyped by Miss Rosemarie Jenkins; provided with the means of publication by the editors of this series, Dr. W. F. Bynum and Dr. V. Nutton; and prepared for the press by Mrs. J. Runciman. I thank them all. But let me exculpate them by adding the time-honoured "preface-paradox": some of what I say is false, and I alone am responsible for every word of it.