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Rembrandt Workshop, The Philosopher, ca. 1660

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Rembrandt Workshop
(Possibly Willem Drost)
The Philosopher, ca. 1660
Oil on canvas
27 ½ x 23 ½ in.
Museum purchase, 2003.18

A Philosopher's Looks



What should a philosopher look like? This is a strange question. What do a philosopher's looks have to do with what goes on inside his or her head? Consider the typical comical or satirical displays of "philosophers" we all know through comic strips and Hollywood movies. Indeed, this is what the public today thinks a philosopher is, just another badly-dressed and unkempt professor roaming our college campuses, clutching worn-out, ear-marked tomes, badly shaven, bespectacled, dreamy, unattractive. There is a long history in art and literature of portraying philosophers in some variation of this type of individual. In literature, one only has to think of Aristophanes' portrayal of Socrates as a ridiculous, though somewhat endearing, loony, or Goethe's *Faust*, who is so closed off in his study dungeon that he goes like mad after the first woman he sees as he emerges into daylight. These portrayals of "philosophers" wouldn't be so popular if they didn't resonate with the broader public, which presumably has little knowledge of what goes on in a philosopher's head. And yet, the idea seems to be, the outer appearance should reflect the inner workings of that person's mind; or, conversely, these popular portrayals are a good representation of those alleged philosophers whom one knows. And getting this image right seems to be a daunting task for artists; one at which Rembrandt (or whoever actually painted this particular image) was apparently very good.

However, not all representations of philosophers are humorous or downright disrespectful, which brings us to our painting: the philosopher here is represented as a dignified, serious, and profound individual. His slightly parted lips indicate that he is on the verge of uttering words of wisdom. His chain and dress indicate that he is a wealthy and well-groomed man. He looks like he could be an updated version (updated for the 17th Century, that is) of someone represented in Raphael's famous *School of Athens*, in which the depicted philosophers are vested in antique robes. And yet what Rembrandt's philosopher has in common with the less serious other depictions is that he, obviously, mirrors some impression that the public of his day must have had of "a philosopher." Otherwise this painting would not have been as awe-inspiring and true-ringing as it has been. Which brings us to the peculiar and interesting conclusion of this short musing: that what a philosopher ought to look like in the eyes of the larger public is a question that philosophers have absolutely no control over! Which is to say, the public has an idea of what "their" philosophers should look like, which in itself is a topic worthy of study for professional philosophers.

One final thought: philosophers can't change the way the broader public thinks, at least not in such a profound and effective way as politicians. This implies, they can't change the way the public thinks of them and their looks. Instead, is it not the case that philosophers, more or less, make themselves fit into the mold that the public has ready-made for them? If any given philosopher replies that he or she has never given this notion any thought, I daresay that this is a lie and the best proof for the claim made here! For, it is a dialectical counterpart to the public's view of philosophers to be ignorant with respect to what the former thinks of them. The public's interest in the philosopher's looks is but the flip side of the philosopher's seeming indifference. Hence, the public and the philosopher need each other, even if our philosopher here seems to be saying, "I don't care." Don't believe a word of it!