

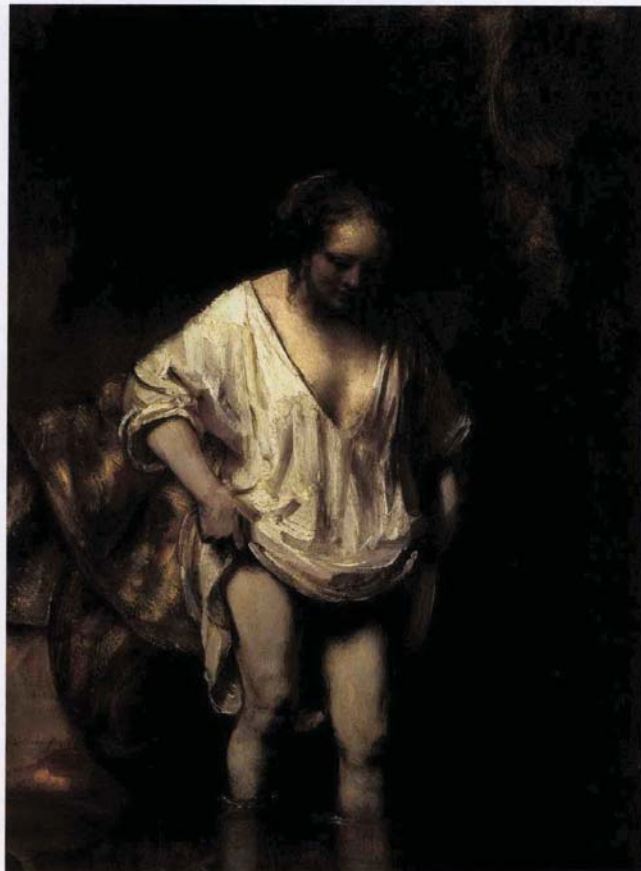
My favourite painting Monty Don

A Woman Bathing in a Stream by Rembrandt



Monty Don is a writer, gardener and television presenter. His new book *Paradise Gardens* is out now, published by Two Roads

¶ My grandfather took me to an art gallery every school holidays and, as my education progressed, we slowly worked our way through the London collections. Rembrandt, he told me, was the greatest artist who had ever lived. I nodded, but was uncertain on what to look for that would confirm that judgement. Then I saw this painting and instantly knew. The subject—almost certainly Rembrandt's common-law wife, Hendrickje Stoffels—is not especially beautiful nor has a body or demeanour that might command especial attention. But, as she lifts the hem of her shift to wade in the water, she is made transcendent by Rembrandt's genius. In this, the simplest of moments by an ordinary person in a painting that is hardly more than a sketch, Rembrandt has captured human love at its most intimate and tender. And there is no more worthy subject than that ¶



A Woman Bathing in a Stream, 1654, by Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69), 24¼in by 18½in, National Gallery, London

John McEwen comments on *A Woman Bathing in a Stream*

REMBRANDT left this painting untitled. If it is a sketch for a biblical or mythological subject, it is unique in his work. He did not consider it a mere 'sketch': it is signed and dated.

Rembrandt's wife, Saskia van Uylenburgh, his social superior, whom he wed in 1634, died in 1642. Of their children, only Titus, a baby at her death, survived. She and Rembrandt had made a joint will, but days before she died, she left everything to Titus. This meant the artist lost his entire estate. He was named his son's guardian and the new will's executor.

Geertje Dirx, Titus's nursemaid, became Rembrandt's mistress. Their time together was not happy, and when she manoeuvred to marry him, there began a saga of legal wrangles, rows and sibling betrayal that ended with her incarceration on his evidence for five years in a 'house of correction'. He was supported by his new mistress, Hendrickje Stoffels (b.1626). Geertje was eventually released in 1655, but died soon after.

The year of this painting, 1654, Hendrickje was accused of 'whoredom' with Rembrandt. She pleaded guilty and was banished from

her church. Three months later, she gave birth to the painter's child, Cornelia.

Rembrandt never paid for his house, the origin of the financial problems that bedevilled the latter part of his life. To shield himself from creditors, he made Hendrickje and Titus form an art dealership, with himself as adviser receiving ring-fenced benefits. He dictated the terms, some of which played son and mistress against each other. In legal statements, Hendrickje called herself his wife. She died in 1663, leaving her effects to him and Cornelia. ↪

