

# Exhibit highlights artist's spirituality

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Michelle Martin/CNS

CHICAGO — Of the thousands expected to see the Art Institute of Chicago's new Rembrandt exhibition, some will go to appreciate the beauty of the works and some will want to view them so they have something to talk about over coffee or cocktails, said Father Richard Fragomeni.

But some will visit the exhibit and see God, added the priest, who is vice rector of the Shrine of Our Lady of Pompeii and associate professor of liturgy and preaching at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.

"Seeing is always a very subjective thing," Father Fragomeni said. "Some people see, and some people don't see. But when you see, something happens spiritually."

Suzanne Folds McCullagh, the exhibit's curator, said there can be little doubt that Rembrandt was thinking spiritually when he created the more than 200 drawings, paintings and etchings that make up the exhibit. A large portion of his work — maybe up to a third — has biblical or other spiritual themes, she said.

During Rembrandt's most successful period, he set for himself the task of constantly drawing biblical scenes, finding new ways to draw viewers in to familiar stories, McCullagh told *The Catholic New World*, Chicago's archdiocesan newspaper.

"When they inventoried his possessions, there were only 20 books — and Rembrandt was a very learned man and an avid collector of things," she said. "One was a very well-worn Bible."

Rembrandt van Rijn was the ninth of 10 children born to a miller, and the only one in the family to be sent to the university — which he soon left to study art.

In terms of religion, "he comes from a modern mixed background," McCullagh said. His father was a member of the Dutch Reformed Church and his mother was a Catholic. The Latin School, where he studied before entering the University of Leiden in Holland, probably took a Calvinist approach, she added.

As a young man, in the early 1630s, Rembrandt accepted one of his first major commissions, a series of paintings on the Passion of Christ. During this time he also established himself in Amsterdam and married Saskia van Uylenburgh.

But as his career progressed, Rembrandt encountered disaster after disaster. Three of the four children he had with Saskia did not survive infancy and Saskia died in 1642.



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Pen and brown ink, brown wash and white watercolor were used by the Dutch master Rembrandt van Rijn on this drawing of Noah's Ark created in 1660. It is among the works in the exhibit "Rembrandt's Journey: Painter, Draftsman, Etcher" on display at the Art Institute of Chicago through May 9.

While he earned good money as a painter, he spent more than he made, and by 1656 his possessions — including his house — were auctioned off to pay his debts. By then, his style had gone out of fashion, and commissions came less frequently. But his work continued to develop until his death in 1669, McCullagh said.

His early biblical scenes reflect his own situation as a young family man, with paintings of the Holy Family and Old Testament scenes rendered with particular detail to the physical appearances of the subjects, giving a unique expression to each face in a crowd.

"There's one early painting of Christ sending the moneylenders from the temple, and it's the product of a young, virile artist," McCullagh said. "A later image of Christ debating with the doctors is much quieter."

The exhibit focuses mostly on his etchings, with about 150 of his 290 surviving prints on display, and the



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The early biblical scenes of Dutch master Rembrandt van Rijn are said to reflect his own situation as a young family man. In this oil painting from 1645, Mary peers at the infant Christ lying in a cradle as angels hover above.

changes in his technique mirror the changes brought by his experience.

After working with an engraver on a few large plates, Rembrandt began working on his own, designing small plates — some not much bigger than a playing card — but the work is detailed almost beyond belief, said McCullagh.

Rembrandt focused more on religious themes than other Dutch artists, perhaps partially because of his upbringing, partially because he was working on themes he picked up on from other artists, working in Catholic Italy, but also because he wanted to touch something inside his viewers, McCullagh said.

She added that visitors will be able to see him dealing with Old and New Testament subjects during the same years, for example, or compare the way he handled Christian subjects early and late in his career.

"You don't need to know the stories," McCullagh said. "You just need to come with open hearts."