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12 May 2026

In *Aristotle with a Bust of Homer*, Rembrandt van Rijn creates an artwork depicting the Greek philosopher, Aristotle, gently placed hand on the stone of Homer, with his gaze slightly turned away as if he was lost in thought. Upon first glance, viewers may assume this interaction between both figures means nothing deeper than basic admiration. However, Rembrandt's creative choices of scene suggests a deeper tension about fame and reputation. I am focusing on the importance of both figures' interaction. What does Aristotle's gaze on the bust of Homer say about his inner conflict? Is his touch to symbolize fear, doubt, identity crisis? The relevance of fame comes into play because the era in which this painting was created, was a time where reputation shaped someone's identity. I argue that Homer's purpose is to represent everlasting fame, Aristotle's expression while being surrounded by luxury suggests he questions what his reputation will become and how Rembrandt projects himself onto this painting to do so. Ultimately I will be using visual details, such as his lost gaze, contrast and color of light and the effects of the brushstrokes, to show how Rembrandt presents conflict of fame through Aristotle.

Aristotle's display of status and wealth is contradicted by his distressed look. His unfocused gaze suggests anxiousness about legacy, identity, and reputation. This deeper meaning not only interprets Aristotle's expression, but also the projection of Rembrandt's own thoughts and concerns about his fame and what his career might one day become. During the time of which Rembrandt created this painting, the Dutch Golden Age, it was known to be a period of high artistic achievement. Many painters alongside Rembrandt strived to be one of the greatest

and most talked about in Europe. The inspiration for their work was driven by the Baroque era. This entailed an intense artistic trend that originated from Italy, the arts were meant to be presented as emotional, deep in color and with clean grandeur in order to showcase power through intense contrast. Rembrandt's style, especially in this painting, highlighted the grandeur immensely. It was presented as impressive in appearance to represent high status, but also a sense of psychological grandeur through the interaction of Aristotle and Homer.

The contrast of lighting deepens the emotional intensity. The shadowed lighting suggests that the main takeaway is focusing on what he is thinking, and the doubt he is experiencing. Homer symbolizes a legacy set in stone, a legacy that lives on. Aristotle's gaze acknowledges the difference between Homer and himself. Rembrandt's choice of white clothes, big hat, gold ring, long beard screams wealth, class, and respect, to show he is not just admiring who Homer is, but comparing himself to him, believing they belong in the same category. In the article "Secrets behind the Contemplation: Formal Analysis of "Aristotle with a Bust of Homer" (1653)" written by Bo-Le & the World, he expresses how "Tall and well-built as [Aristotle] may be, wealthy as he may be, respectable as he may be, all that is fleeting. This thin, blind man in front of him, who barely lived one day of a decent life, is the sort of man he wants to become, for his achievement is timeless, his reputation eternal, his name immortal." Aristotle seems to be coming to the realization that status and physical success can eventually fade, looking at Homer he admires, but craves the immortality of his fame and reputation. This interpretation becomes more powerful when depicted alongside the shift of Rembrandt's career at that time. As a painter, it took him a few years till he began to create a name for himself, but once he did his fame grew rapidly he was being praised and celebrated by many for his style of art for a little over a decade until he started to fall. During the mid 40s to 50s, Rembrandt's style had shifted negatively in the

eyes of the public, who preferred clean, outlined, colored work unlike his now dark, rough, raw style and felt he didn't abide by the rules of classical art. Ernst van de Wetering contributed in an article in the Britannica, on how "Rembrandt became largely misunderstood and was ignored after 1642... At the same time, his art deepened. The post-1642 Rembrandt would develop into the "real" Rembrandt, profoundly at one with his inner self." This suggests Rembrandt stopped making art to please people, and instead painted with more personal depth showing his inner struggles connected to his personal identity. His brush strokes were seen to be too intense, too expressive, but this allowed his painting to become livelier and represent his raw emotions while creating his work. Bo-Le & the World, also creates the connection that "there's something that's more prominent here than brushwork — the use of light... Aristotle's warm soft flesh hand seems to blend into Homer's cold hard marble head, as if the warmth of the sunlight has melted both and mixed them together on the surface — they are no longer separate individuals; they are united together as a whole." This is relevant because it shows how Rembrandt uses light to connect Aristotle and Homer symbolically. The connection through light represents how Aristotle wants the same legacy Homer created for himself and continues to maintain.

In an article, "Rembrandt's "Aristotle": Exemplary Beholder", written by Margaret Deutsch Carroll, she makes a point that many people just like her have always tried to interpret Rembrandt's work and simply none can ever agree on one interpretation on his paintings. There were many examples of different paintings used to show how this is true, but when talking about the Aristotle painting she reveals her own interpretation, "the philosopher's thoughtful gaze suggests that he may be passing, in a familiar mediational progression, from an initial stage of sensory observation to one of intellectual deliberation." She is suggesting that Aristotle's gaze is meant to be a deeper moment of reflection and intellectual thought. From first glance Aristotle is

visually observing the sculpture, but then his thoughts shift into larger ideas such as fame, reputation, and legacy. Carroll continues to explore the similarities of Aristotle to other saints and philosophers Rembrandt has painted, making the connection that he always paints these figures not always keeping their gaze on the main object which is typically a book such as the bible. Rembrandt made a different creative choice in this particular painting, keeping the idea of learning in the books painted in the background of Aristotle, but choosing to give the attention of the philosopher to the sculpture at hand. This is important because it strengthens the idea that Homer is a symbol of a long lasting legacy while Aristotle represents physical success he was having in that moment and questioning the lastingness of his fame after death. Interestingly enough, Menno Jonker wrote a piece “Rembrandt's Philosopher: Aristotle in The Eye of the Beholder”, also deep diving into how many viewed not the painting as a whole, but who these figures were meant to be. There was much confusion as to who Rembrandt was depicting looking at the painting alone with no title. There were guesses that the figure was either Aristotle or Albertus Magnus, this writer believed that if many were able to guess the sculpture is Homer than “Aristotle shares a more obvious connection to [him]”. This suggests that Rembrandt intentionally paired the philosopher with the poet because he viewed them with a significant connection. Jonker also goes on to highlight “the tendency to question the authority of the philosopher was made especially urgent by new scientific approaches and experiments.” This directly supports the idea that Aristotle’s reputation and intelligence was being challenged in his time. His expression in the painting can very likely represent his awareness that the public’s perception can challenge his fame and Rembrandt was able to symbolize that because he was feeling and experiencing that same thing.

In “Touching Stone: Rembrandt’s Aristotle with a Bust of Homer”, Todd P. Olson argues less about what Aristotle is thinking and more about the act itself, how touch creates unstable meanings between one and the other. He explains how the painting has been repeatedly misunderstood throughout the years from different artists, cultures, materials. Olson also creates the connection of Rembrandt's techniques to ideas of material decay, to argue that he intentionally created instability. This allows Aristotle's expression to feel emotionally unsure of himself. Through Olson’s argument that Rembrandt created tension between objects and ideas, Aristotle can be seen as intentionally caught in the middle of admiring Homer and aware of his uncertain fame and reputation.

Now viewed with this information, it can be said that Aristotle’s worried gaze is possibly a projection of Rembrandt’s own instability. As Aristotle contemplates Homer's fame to the uncertainty of his, Rembrandt mirrors the uncertainty of his own fame on Aristotle. They both worry about their reputation because it’s out of their control, it is determined by the public eye, their taste can always change from one day to the next and they are forced to confront the limits of reputation . The contrast between what Aristotle appears to be and the doubt he experiences is significant. He is painted to symbolize wealth and power through his gold chain and heavy clothing, this detail sparks the idea that as much luxuries and money Aristotle can have, it cannot buy his satisfaction of lasting fame. Just how Rembrandt’s rise to fame was never guaranteed to last. Aristotle becomes more than just a simple historical figure, but a symbolic path for Rembrandt to explore his own anxiety. Aristotle’s gaze doesn’t truly meet Homer, but beyond him, towards the future of how and what he will be remembered by. Rembrandt;s creative decisions were able to take a simple scene into a complex interpretation on the conflict of fame and reputation

Work Cited

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