Citizen Soldiers

A Dutch poet of Rembrandt’s day wrote, “When the country is in danger, every citizen is a soldier.” That was the idea behind the militia, or civic guard companies, which trained citizens how to fight and shoot in case their city was attacked. Each company drilled in archery, the crossbow, or the musket. By Rembrandt’s time, militia companies were as much social clubs as military organizations.

Captain Frans Banning Cocq, out to impress everyone, chose Rembrandt to paint his militia company, with members of the company paying the artist to have their portraits included in the painting. The huge canvas was to be hung in the new hall of the militia headquarters, where it would be seen at receptions and celebrations along with other militia paintings.

By the mid-seventeenth century, there were more than one hundred big militia paintings hanging in public halls in the important cities of the Netherlands. In all of these group portraits, the men were evenly lined up so that each face got equal attention, just as they had been in traditional anatomy lesson paintings. Rembrandt did not like this way of presenting the scene. He had seen militia companies in action, and there were always people milling about who were not militiamen but who took part in their exercises and parades. To add realism to the piece, he decided to include some of these people, as well as a dog. There was room on the wall for a canvas about sixteen feet wide, large enough for Rembrandt to do what no other painter had ever done before. His idea was to show the exciting commotion before a parade began.
• Call students’ attention to the Author’s Insight and have students point out lighter images in the painting and then the darker images in the painting.

• Ask: How do the lighter images in the painting reflect a militia’s importance?

Answer: The face of the highest ranking officer shining, the dress of the second officer reflecting brightly, and the girl acting as a mascot all contribute to the idea of a parade honoring the militia.

Two Handsome Officers

Everywhere in the painting, Rembrandt used sharp contrasts of dark and light. Everything that honors the citizen soldiers and their work is illuminated; everything else is in shadow. Captain Frans Banning Coq is the man dressed in

Expressive Vocabulary

As students are discussing Rembrandt’s painting, encourage them to use the expressive vocabulary presented earlier. You might encourage them with sentence starters like these:

1. Without the benefit of Mühlberger’s study of this painting, I would...
2. One thing I discovered in the painting is...
3. If I ponder the painting long enough, I will...
4. Sometimes I can’t discuss a painting until...
Rembrandt painted people
Black with a red sash under his arm, striding forward in the center. Standing next to him is the most brightly lighted man in the painting. Lieutenant Willem van Ruytenburgh, attired in a glorious gold and yellow uniform, silk sash, soft leather cavalry boots, and a high hat with white ostrich plumes. His lance-like weapon, called a partisan, and the steel gorget⁵ around his neck—a leftover from the days when soldiers were full suits of armor—are the only hints that he is a military man. Rembrandt links him to Banning Cocq by contrasting the colors of their clothing and by painting the shadow of Banning Cocq’s hand on the front of van Ruytenburgh’s coat. The captain is giving orders to his lieutenant for the militia company to march off.

Banning Cocq is dressed in a black suit against a dark background, yet he does not disappear. Rembrandt made him the most important person in the composition. Van Ruytenburgh turns to listen to him, which shows his respect for his commander. Banning Cocq’s face stands out above his bright red sash and white collar. How well Rembrandt knew that darkness makes faces shine! The captain’s self-assured pace, the movement of the tassels at his knees, and the angle of his walking staff are proof of the energy and dignity of his stride.

Muskets and Mascots
On either side of these two handsome officers, broad paths lead back into the painting.

Rembrandt knew that when the huge group scene was placed above eye level on the wall of the militia headquarters, these empty areas would be the first to be seen. He wanted them to lead the eyes of viewers to figures in the painting who did not have the advantage of being placed in the foreground. In the middle of one of these paths is a man in red pouring gunpowder into the barrel of his musket. Behind the captain, only partially seen, another man shoots his gun into the air, and a third militiaman, to the right of van Ruytenburgh, blows on his horn.

1. gorget (gôr’jît) n. a piece of armor for the throat.

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**Critical Viewing**

**Answer:** Rembrandt painted people in natural positions; he included bystanders in the scene, including a dog. (Guide students to the bottom of page 359.)

**10 Author’s Insight**

- Have students read the Author’s Insight note in the margin and discuss the author’s observation that “the Dutch value individuality.”
- **Ask:** What details in the painting reflect the idea that the Dutch value the individual?
  **Answer:** Every man is dressed differently and portrays a different personality. Even the minor characters are given individual characteristics different from the rest.

**11 Nonfiction**

**Supporting Paragraphs**

- Remind students that when analyzing support in literature, students need to be able to differentiate between fact and opinion.
  **Ask:** In the paragraph describing Banning Cocq, name one statement that is an opinion; then name one statement that is a fact.
  **Answer:** “Rembrandt made him the most important person in the composition” is an opinion because although there is support for this opinion, it is not verifiable. “Banning Cocq is dressed in a black suit against a dark background,” is a fact that is verifiable by looking at the painting itself.

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**Reading Check**

**What technique did Rembrandt use to make the citizen soldiers stand out?**

After they have read these or other articles by Richard Mühlberger, have students form discussion groups to compare and contrast the selections they have read. Suggest criteria for comparison, such as type of writing, support, and organization. To extend the activity, have volunteers present brief oral reports to the class on the selections they chose.
Critical Viewing

**Answer:** Students might notice the details of these portraits now that they are pulled out of the larger group picture. Details might include their facial expressions and the elaborateness of their clothes.

Critical Thinking

**Support**

Explain to students that while the author is stating his opinions about the painting, he is also supporting his opinions with a lot of details. For example, in the bracketed text, he is explaining that Rembrandt could highlight a person’s rank in many different ways, not just by shining light on them as he does with the two main figures. As students read the bracketed text, ask them to find and list the details that support this idea.

**Answer:** Visscher holds the highest rank after the two main figures; he waves a military flag; he is high on the stairs; his costume is elegant.

A Red Ribbon and Fine Old Clothes

In spite of his partial appearance, the drummer on the right seems ready to come forward to lead a march with his staccato beat. The sound seems to bother the dusty dog below. Behind the drummer, two men appear to be figuring out their places in the formation. The one in the white collar and

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Vocabulary Development

**Vocabulary Knowledge Rating**

When students have completed reading and discussing “What Makes a Rembrandt a Rembrandt?” have them take out their Vocabulary Knowledge Rating Chart for this selection. Read the words aloud once more and have students rate their knowledge of the words again in the After Reading column.

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black hat outranks many of the others in the scene. His prestige is signaled in an unusual way: A red ribbon dangles over his head, tied to the lance of the man in armor behind van Ruytenburgh. Additional lances can be counted in the darkness, some leaning against the wall, others carried by militiamen. Their crisscross patterns add to the feeling of commotion that Rembrandt has captured everywhere on the huge canvas.

The costumes worn in this group portrait are much more ornate and colorful than what Dutchmen ordinarily wore every day. Some, like the breeches and helmet of the man shooting his musket behind Banning Cocq, go back a hundred years to the beginnings of the militia company. In the eyes of many Dutchmen, clothing associated with a glorious past brought special dignity to the company. What an opportunity for Rembrandt, perhaps the greatest lover of old clothes in Amsterdam!

**Not a Night Watch**

*Night Watch* is a mistaken title that was given to the painting over a hundred years after Rembrandt died, but it has stuck, and is what the painting is almost universally called. Although the exaggerated chiaroscuro\(^3\) does give an impression of night time, there is daylight in the scene. It comes from the left, as the shadows under Banning Cocq’s feet prove. And it is clear that no one in the painting is on watch, alert to the approach of an enemy. The official title of the painting is *Officers and Men of the Company of Captain Frans Banning Cocq and Lieutenant Willem van Ruytenburgh*.

Rembrandt completed the painting in 1642, when he was thirty-six years old. He probably had no idea that it would be the most famous Dutch painting of all time. In 1678, one of his former students wrote that it would “outlive all its rivals,” and within another century the painting was considered one of the wonders of the world.

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**Nonfiction**

**Writer’s Style**

Mühlberger discusses the elaborate period costumes and adds his own enthusiasm for Rembrandt.

**Nonfiction**

**Organization**

The details in this paragraph are presented chronologically.

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**Enrichment for Gifted/Talented Students**

After students have read the selection, lead a discussion about the author’s analysis of the painting. Then, challenge each student to choose a painting they have seen and write an analytical article using the same techniques and style that the author uses. Have students bring in copies of their paintings to show the rest of the class.

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3. **chiaroscuro** (kè’ är’ a skoor’ ə) n. a dramatic style of light and shade in a painting or drawing.
Literature in Context

Fine Art Connection Rembrandt is famous for his use of chiaroscuro, lighting a feature he wants to emphasize against a dark background or dark shadows. *Chiaro* means bright or light in Italian (from the Latin root *clarus*, meaning clear.) *Oscuro* means dark, from the Latin *obscurus*, meaning obscure, that is, hard to see.

Connect to the Literature Have students look at both Rembrandt paintings and compare the techniques he used in each one.

- **Ask** the Connect to the Literature question.

**Answer:** In *The Night Watch*, Rembrandt used most of the techniques that he used in *The Syndics of the Clothmakers’ Guild*. He uses chiaroscuro, contrasting the light faces of the militia men, van Ruytenburgh’s coat, and the mascot’s face with the dark background and dark clothing. The soldiers are not posed, but are chaotically gathering and preparing. In both paintings, the faces all differ from each other, showing individuality and a variety of expressions. However, there is more focus on the individual faces in the “Guild” painting, and more emphasis on the crowd of people in the “Watch” painting.

Red is not the only bright color used, though it is front and center in Banning Cocq’s sash. But in *The Night Watch*, Rembrandt also uses gold, yellow, orange, and blue in addition to red.

Connect to the Literature Which of these techniques that Rembrandt used can you see in *The Night Watch*?
**From the Author’s Desk**

**Richard Mühlberger’s Insights Into His Article**

**Q. Why are Rembrandt’s paintings often so dark?**

**A.** My answer is just a guess. First, the interiors of houses were darker then. Second, Rembrandt was often more interested in the siter’s personality than in his features. He brings this out by contrasts of light and dark. Finally, by contrasting ordinary light colors with dark ones, Rembrandt causes the light ones to take on greater brightness.

**Q. What qualities make Rembrandt one of the most famous artists of all time?**

**A.** You can tell when Rembrandt thought one of his subjects was dull, boring, or, perhaps, dumb. These portraits are not inspiring. But when he found a spark in his subject, he made a glorious likeness that captures the siter’s inner life as well as his or her physical appearance. This is a rare quality in portraits, and it makes Rembrandt stand out from most other artists.

**Student Corner**

**Q. How was Rembrandt able to capture so much detail in the portraits?**

—Karlesse Clayton, Pasadena, California

**A.** Remember that a Rembrandt painting is far larger than the reproduction of it you see in the text. So he could include many details. Also, the page of a book is flat while Rembrandt’s painted surfaces are full of textures. There are many flecks and small globbs applied with brushes laden with paint. As you move away from them, they take on the appearance of familiar things—an eye, a mole, a button, or a glint of light, for instance.

**Writing Workshop: Work in Progress**

**How-to Essay**

For a how-to essay you may write, make a list of five everyday tasks. These tasks can be anything you do, from brushing your teeth to opening your locker. Save this Everyday List in your writing portfolio.

**Assessment Resources**

The following resources can be used to assess students’ knowledge and skills.

**Unit 3 Resources:**
- Selection Test A, pages 8–10
- Selection Test B, pages 11–13

Students may use the Self-test to prepare for Selection Test A or Selection Test B.

**Writing Workshop**

In the Work-in-Progress assignments through Part 1, students will complete activities that prepare them for the Writing Workshop on writing a how-to essay on p. 430. Work with students on this brief prewriting activity.

Have them save their work in their portfolios for later use.