**Painting:** The Night Watch

**Artist:** Rembrandt (1606-1668)

**Year Painted:** 1642

**Medium:** oil on canvas

**Background Information on the artist:**

The greatest artist of The Dutch School was Rembrandt. He was a master of light and shadow whose paintings, drawings and etchings made him a giant in the art world. In his own words, his painting sought to illustrate “the greatest and most natural movement.”

His full name was Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, and he was born in 1606 in Leiden, in the Dutch Republic, now the Netherlands. His family was quite well off. His father was a miller and his mother was a baker's daughter. As a boy he attended Latin school and was enrolled at the University of Leiden, although his inclination was more towards painting.

He dropped out of college and became apprenticed to several different painters over the course of several years. Rembrandt eventually started his own workshop and opened a studio in Leiden, which he shared with a friend.

In 1631 Rembrandt moved to Amsterdam, which was quickly becoming the new business capital of the Netherlands. He began to practice as a professional portrait painter for the first time, with great success. He was discovered by a well-known statesman who would commission Rembrandt for important painting jobs from the court of The Hague.

In 1634 he married the beautiful Saskia van Uylenburgh who used to model for him. That same year, Rembrandt became a burgess of Amsterdam and a member of the local guild of painters. He soon became the leading portrait painter in Holland and received many commissions for portraits as well as for paintings of religious subjects. People’s faces deeply interested him. He often expressed the personality of his model in a single expression. He would dress his models in elaborate costumes so that he could capture the way light fell on fine materials.

In 1639 Rembrandt and Saskia moved to a prominent, newly built house, but struggled to pay the mortgage. Rembrandt should easily have been able to pay the house off with his large income, but it appears his spending always kept pace with his income, and he may have made some unsuccessful investments.
Although they were affluent, it didn’t protect the couple from suffering severe personal tragedies; three of their four children died in infancy -- only their last child, a son, survived into adulthood. In fact, Saskia herself died in 1642 from tuberculosis, soon after he was born. Rembrandt's drawings of her on her deathbed are among his most emotionally moving works.

Still, Rembrandt continued to live beyond his means, buying art (including bidding up his own work), prints (often used in his paintings), and rarities. He avoided bankruptcy in 1656 by selling off most of his paintings and large collection of antiquities. A few years later, Rembrandt was forced to sell his house and move into more modest accommodations. He died in 1668, and was buried in an unmarked grave.

THE DUTCH GOLDEN AGE OF PAINTING:

The 17th Century Dutch Republic was the most prosperous nation at that time, and led Europe in trade, science, and art. The Dutch Golden Age is a period roughly spanning the 1620s to 1670s. Dutch painting was similar to the Baroque style occurring in the rest of Europe, but Dutch paintings shirked the “idealization and love of splendor” typical of Baroque work. Dutch Masters painted portraits with detailed, candid realism and active scenes of everyday life.

ABOUT THE PAINTING:

“The Night Watch” is famous for three essential characteristics: its colossal size, the effective use of light and shadow, and the perception of motion in what would have traditionally been a static military portrait. At the time of the painting it was very common for military units to commission painters for their portraits. When Rembrandt painted this portrait, the Eighty Years War (1598-1648) was almost over. It was a celebratory time when the Netherlands had nearly won their independence from Spain.

It took Rembrandt two years to paint what was originally called “The Militia Company of Captain Cocq” (1640 -1642). It became better known as “The Nachtwacht” because by the 18th century the picture was so dirty and defaced that it was almost indistinguishable. It looked like a night scene. After it was cleaned, it was discovered to represent broad day—a party of musketeers stepping from a gloomy courtyard into the blinding sunlight.

The work was hailed as a success from the beginning. The canvas measures more
than 12 feet high and more than 14 ½ feet wide and was originally even larger. Parts of the canvas were cut off (approximately 20% from the left hand side was removed) to make the painting fit its new position when it was moved to The Amsterdam Town Hall.

The complex composition includes 29 figures and was painted at the height of Rembrandt’s career when he fully realized his gifted use of light and its mystical qualities. The painting is Baroque in nature with figures half-hidden, placed in shadows, but breaks tradition by showing animated soldiers, not posed subjects. Rembrandt showed the militia Readying themselves to embark on a mission (what kind of mission, an ordinary patrol or some special event, is a matter of debate).

The only light is coming from very high up through an unseen window on the left. It is yellow and warm and primarily illuminates the little girl and the two principal figures below -- they are Captain Cocq in black, and his lieutenant, Willem van Rijutenberg in yellow. The eye is naturally led to these three main characters shining out of the crowd. This is because of the sunlight and shadow features that Rembrandt uses in the most effective ways in this painting.

Many of the men who modeled for this painting were angered when Rembrandt did not give the same lighting to everyone in the piece. The portrait is painted like a photograph – a snapshot of a specific time and place. Many of the men are looking elsewhere and not straight ahead. There’s even a man in a black jacket with an outstretched arm in front of another’s face, obscuring it from view.

The Night Watch has been the target of two separate vandalism attacks. One of the attacks occurred in 1975 when someone left zigzag marks by using a butter knife on the painting. Another horrible incident occurred in 1990, when a man sprayed acid all over it. The artwork still shows some of the zigzag marks even though it has been fully restored.

The painting currently hangs in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. It is considered to be the most famous painting displayed there, and the finest example of the Dutch Golden Age of Painting.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR THE KIDS:***

- Where is the main focal point of the piece? Where does Rembrandt want us to look first?
• Is this painting during the day, or at night? How can you tell?

• Are the men’s clothes fancy or plain? How can you tell?

• Is this portrait flattering to the soldiers? Why or why not?

• What’s happening in the painting? Where are the men going?

• What sounds would you expect to hear if you were there?

• What do you like or don’t like about the painting?

• Play an eye-spy type of thing.
  - Who can find a soldier holding a spear?
  - Who can find a soldier holding a flag?
  - Who can find a little girl?
  - Who sees a young boy with his back to us wearing a crown of leaves?
  - Where is there a drum?
  - Who sees a dog?
  - Who sees a shield hanging up high?