The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Tulp (1632)
Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669)
Baroque period
The World of Rembrandt van Rijn

The 17th Century has been referred to as “The Golden Age of Dutch Art” (1). Overflowing with genius, Rembrandt and contemporaries such as Hals and Vermeer, delivered work of consistently high caliber. Art was in great demand and - fortunately - great artists were in healthy supply.

Rembrandt painted The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Tulp sixteen years before the conclusion of The Eighty years War (1568–1648). Eventually this conflict would see resolution with victory for the Dutch as the seven Northern provinces gained independence from Spain (2). Thanks to vigorous exchange with the Indies, the “United Provinces” were carrying half of Europe’s trade, and with it great prosperity (6).
Amsterdam’s well-to-do, the Burghers, commissioned portraits that would preserve their lives of good fortune for posterity. Group portraits in 17th century Holland were a social institution; leading citizens were keen to be seen rubbing elbows with other elites, especially those in positions of power (6).

Nicolaes Tulp, 39 was such a man - an anatomist, surgeon, and civilian of the first order. Tulp has been noted in various sources as city treasurer, Mayor, and Praelector Anatomiae at the Guild of Surgeons charged with apprenticing young surgeons (5).
While anatomical knowledge would be in keeping with the Dutch’s forward momentum of scientific inquiry it is also probable that Calvinistic religious tolerance opened the door for such pursuits (3).

However, during Rembrandt’s time permission was granted rarely for human dissection and only to universities for instruction (6).

By striking contrast, Italy was stuck in the orthodoxy of the dark ages, persecuting Galileo, for example, for the “crime” of heresy upon his discovery of the heliocentric model of the solar system (8).
The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Tulp
Observations...
The figures in the painting are comprised of wealthy Amsterdam citizens and physicians (10). The placement of figures in the image follows the custom of this day: No one is extremely prominent, thereby upholding an egalitarian ethic (which still exists to this day) (12). Tulp, however, is clearly a presence—counterbalancing the entire group with his black hat, outfit and position (he is the only one facing left).

We, the viewer, trace the course of the group’s inspection as we first look rightward to Tulp then follow his arm downward to the dissection. We move into the diagonal of the deceased and continue our gaze clockwise into the veil of death (the criminal’s obscured face).
The Amsterdam Guild allowed one annual public dissection utilizing the body of an executed criminal (10); Aris Kindt filled the bill having been recently hanged for armed robbery (9). Upon his death he was taken to the Anatomy Theatre of the Guild of Surgeons where the painting was created (10).
Interestingly, while the cadaver’s face is in shadow, courtesy of the man hovering above his head, the body is almost aglow – the light made even more striking in contrast to Tulp’s heavy black wardrobe. The relationship between these two could be a remark on religious concepts regarding the Angel of Death- a figure shrouded in black.

Regardless, Rembrandt in his mid-twenties already displayed a mastery of the critical technique of chiaroscuro, a method of conveying mood and evoking emotion through the strategic use of light and shadow raised to new heights by Italian forerunner, Caravaggio (11).
It may be inferred by the position of Tulp’s left hand, that he is demonstrating the effect on the fingers caused by the very tendons he grips with the forceps in his right hand.

Note the two individuals in the center of the piece and how they convey movement. The man on the left looks down at the dissection, as the man to the right observes Tulp’s flexed hand. This recalls the Parallax Effect; simulating movement by closing one eye than opening it upon closing the other – all while fixed on the same object (i.e., the illusion of movement.) Casting one’s gaze between these two individuals creates an almost animated result – the acknowledgement of cause and effect (7).
Lastly, we notice three men in the group looking at us. We aren’t merely distant observers; rather we are actually in the room being acknowledged as part of the scene. While the wardrobes clearly date the participants, the painter’s approach has cemented our involvement in the lesson. Rembrandt’s gift is beyond technique; he has transcended the distance of time that lies between the viewer and the work, achieving a truly enduring masterpiece.
Sources

3. http://tjx.sagepub.com/content/107/835/22.extract