

very few of those," writes West.

Even those dances that are recorded on film may not be adequately preserved. Avant-garde choreographer Yvonne Rainer complained of the camera's fixed position and its tendency to foreshorten when she assessed a film of her own performance of her piece *Trio A*. The film "reveals someone who can't straighten her legs, can't plié 'properly' and can't achieve the 'original' elongation and vigor in her jumps, arabesques... and shifts of weight," she wrote. Rainer's work has been notated and she has taught it to "authorized transmitters."

But some dances simply can't endure unchanged. Many of the nuances of Russian-American choreographer George Balanchine's signature 1946 ballet *The Four Temperaments* are lost, even in current performances by the company he founded, the New York City Ballet. Dance historian Nancy Reynolds has filmed various aging dancers who worked with Balanchine as they coached younger dancers on the finer points of the performance. It remains to be seen whether this project can preserve the spirit of the dance.

As for Cambodia's classical dancers, a few did survive. Many of them went to the United States and Europe, with the memory of the dance embedded in their muscles and their minds. Otherwise it would have been lost, for, as one survivor said, "the dancers were the documents."

ARTS & LETTERS

Rembrandt's Theatrical Realism

THE SOURCE: "The God of Realism" by Robert Hughes, in *The New York Review of Books* (April 6, 2006).

THE WORKS OF SOME GREAT artists inspire admiration and awe, but fail to connect at the gut level with the viewer. Not so the paintings of Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69), observes art critic Robert Hughes. In an age dominated by grand paintings and ennobled human subjects, Rembrandt never used "the human form as a means of escape from the disorder and episodic ugliness of the real world." He imbued his subjects with enough flaws and "ordinariness" to earn a

place as "the first god of realism after Caravaggio."

Yet a misunderstanding of Rembrandt's realism has been one of the pitfalls of the effort by the Rembrandt Research Project and others to eliminate work falsely attributed to Rembrandt from his canon. One art historian discredited a putative Rembrandt called *David Playing the Harp Before Saul* (1650–55), on the grounds it was "too theatrical." Says Hughes: "Theatricality doesn't disprove Rembrandt; it is one of the things that makes him a great Baroque artist, as well as a great realist."

The task of authenticating Rembrandt's work is vastly complicated by the milieu in which he painted. Hardly a reclusive genius, Rembrandt surrounded himself with students and assistants who learned to emulate his style. Hughes lists among the

characteristics of Rembrandt's work the honest, even vulgar, details of commonplace life, the ability to depict "unvarnished, unedited pain," as in his gory *The Blinding of Samson* (1636), and a skill as "the supreme depicter of inwardness, of human thought," even in allegorical figures. Touches of humanity's imperfection, to Hughes, serve to dramatize the subject matter. In *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (c. 1668) the boy has lost a shoe

EXCERPT

Room for Improvement

Poetry writing is more humane than life. It's full of second chances. Your sentence, so to speak, can always be revised. You can fix the inappropriate, adjust every carelessness, improve what you felt. How perfect for someone like me: unabashed avoidance one afternoon, a little excess in the evening, a few corrections in the morning. The various ways I've embarrassed myself, crumpled up, in the wastebasket, never to be seen.

—STEPHEN DUNN, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet,
in *The Georgia Review* (Winter 2006)

in the rush to embrace his father; his bare foot is at once humanly vulnerable and a “none-too-subliminal image of the stripping of the spirit.”

Paintings once revered as the essence of Rembrandt, such as *The Man With the Golden Helmet* (c. 1650), are now widely regarded as the work of others. Today debate swirls around *The Polish Rider* (c. 1653), which hangs in New York’s Frick Collection. “To imagine

Rembrandt without *The Polish Rider*,” writes Hughes, “is rather like trying to imagine Wagner without *Parsifal*.”

Rembrandt left only the barest explanations of how he viewed his art. Hughes sees his conception of himself as artist embodied in the Kenwood House self-portrait of 1661–62. Rembrandt sits before a canvas on which two arcs are painted. The half-circles allude to the ancient Greek story of the

painter Apelles, who, upon visiting the studio of a fellow master painter and finding him absent, drew a perfect freehand circle on the studio wall, letting his artistic skill serve as his calling card. Rembrandt couches the allusion in a scene from his daily painterly life; he provides both a glimpse of his humanity and an “incontrovertible, utterly simple proof of mastery.” Realism becomes a conduit for the power of the sublime.

OTHER NATIONS

What Killed Angkor?

THE SOURCE: “The End of Angkor” by Richard Stone, in *Science* (March 10, 2006).

LOCATED IN MODERN-DAY Cambodia, the once-sprawling city of Angkor was the center of a powerful Khmer kingdom whose rule in Southeast Asia lasted from the ninth to 15th centuries. At its height, Angkor boasted a population of several hundred thousand, an extensive system of reservoirs and waterways, and many elaborate Hindu temples such as the immense, gilded Angkor Wat. Thai armies encroached on the area in the mid-15th century, and by the 16th century the city lay abandoned for reasons unclear, *Science’s* Asia news editor, Richard Stone, writes. Among the theories offered for Angkor’s demise are the shift of trade southward toward the sea and the ascension of Theravada

Buddhism in the area.

Thirty years ago French researchers proposed an alternate catalyst, a sharp decline in crop yields possibly caused by the silting of irrigation channels sped by deforestation. Then the rule of the Khmer Rouge from 1975–79 and subsequent chaos halted archaeological efforts in Angkor for nearly 20 years. Recent discoveries made by the Australian-led Greater Angkor Project reveal that a combination of bad engineering and geological uplift of the area’s riverbeds centuries ago may have hindered the functioning of Angkor’s engineered water system and left the city vulnerable to food shortages.

The team used satellite imagery and ground surveys to reveal a city that was far larger than previously thought. The canals, water tanks,

and three large reservoirs formed the basis of a water management system that completely altered the natural landscape. Around the canal system grew a “vast low-density patchwork of homes, temples, and rice paddies” scattered over a thousand square kilometers.

One mystery of Angkor’s watercourses is a spillway branching off from one of the canals that seems to have been purposely destroyed. Archaeologist Roland Fletcher hypothesizes that Angkor engineers tried in vain to remedy a flow problem, then tore apart the spillway to prevent it from causing further disruptions. According to Fletcher, Angkor’s water infrastructure “became so inflexible, convoluted, and huge that it could neither be replaced nor avoided, and had become both too elaborate and too piecemeal.” As a result, it became less able to accommodate events such as drought or flood. Future research into the changing climate conditions of the area will reveal whether erratic monsoons between 1300 and 1600, leading to drier