Jan van Bijlert
St. Matthew and The Angel

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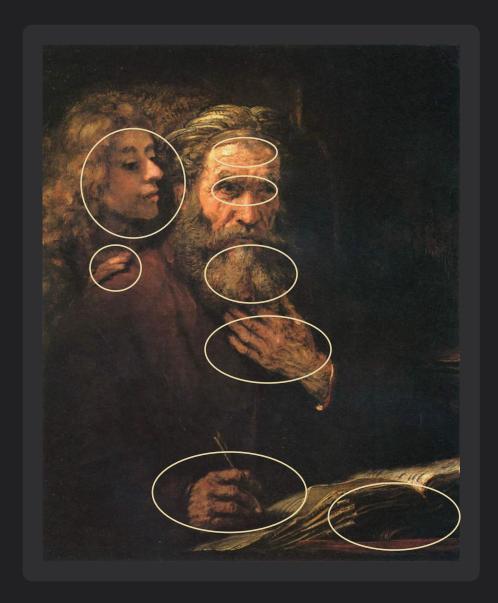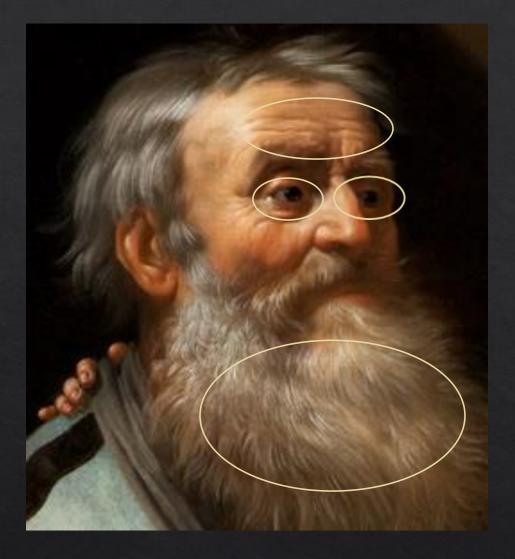- Jan Van Bijlert was known for his paintings of the evangelists which were done in oils on canvas. The group of paintings he had done belonged to the art collection of Cornelis Apostool (1762-1844), then the director of the Koninklijk Museum (now known as Rijksmuseum). The director of Rijksmuseum put them up for sale anonymously at Christies in London in 1822, offering the four evangelists as a single lot. They came up for auction in London again (1830) but the four paintings were offered separately and were bought by the same buyer. Near a hundred years later, the group of paintings were split up, two of them ended up in the possession of museums: John was acquired by the Centraal Museum in Utrecht in 1962,5 while Matthew was acquired by the Ulster Museum in Belfast, which is the painting we will be looking into today.

- I want to compare Jan Van Bijlerts St. Matthew to Rembrandts St. Matthew, this will make points in both paintings stand out more and show the contrast between the two in many different aspects of the paintings; these different aspects can be colours, structure, details, movement, environment, technique, expression etc.
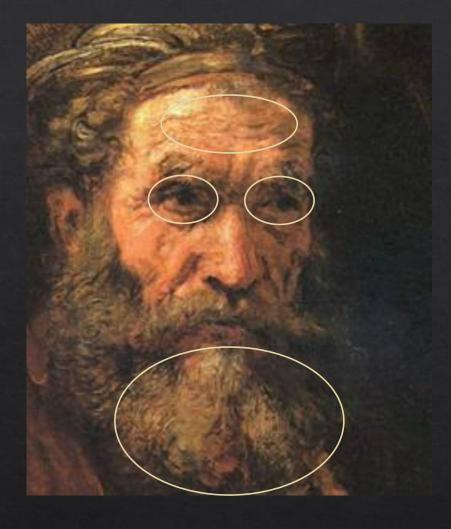
The main focus of both pieces is Matthew and the angel, so lets focus on Matthews face for a moment:

There are multiple things to talk about when it comes to Matthews face alone, such as the way he is represented as an older man with wrinkles and grey hair, yet his skin is full of life, bronzed and flushed with a beautiful glow. Could you say the glow is coming from the presence of the angel who stands beside him? Could it even be the presence of Jesus himself?
When looking at Matthews eyes they are hollow, looking straight forward instead of looking aside the angel and in a sense he looks almost blind, it appears he is looking at something he can't comprehend. His beard appears to be floating, it is unnatural yet serves purpose to the scene as the presence of the lord could be standing Infront of him while the shape of his mouth adds to the sense of disbelief and worry for what the angel is telling him.
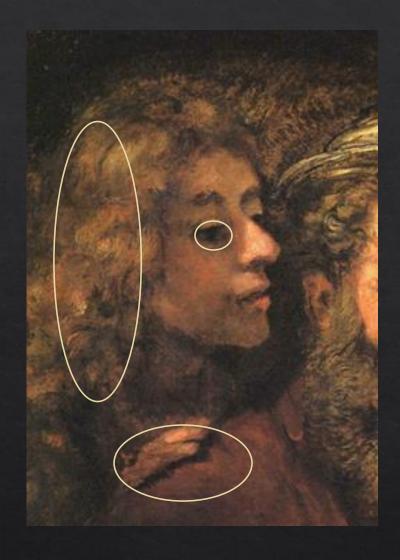
Compared to Van Bijlerts Matthew, Rembrandt's representation of Matthew seems darker in both tone and environment. Due to the more realistic approach in Rembrandts representation, Matthews complexion is more blotchy and aged, there's no evident glow except from natural highlights on the nose and forehead while the wrinkles create more texture to the sullen nature of his expression. The beard gives a more scratchy and unkempt appearance compared the Bijlerts, it looks almost stiff. The different tones of browns and hints of red create the dept needed for a realistic example. While still showing the separate strands of hair throughout the sides leading to the front to meet the highlight showing where the light is coming from. His eyes appear different from Biljerts painting of Matthew, instead of looking worried, shocked or blind he almost appears angry while looking at someone outside the frame. Could this also be Jesus Matthew is looking at in this painting? He is pouting rather than frowning which makes me think he is also questioning the situation in front of him or the events the angel is telling him to write about.
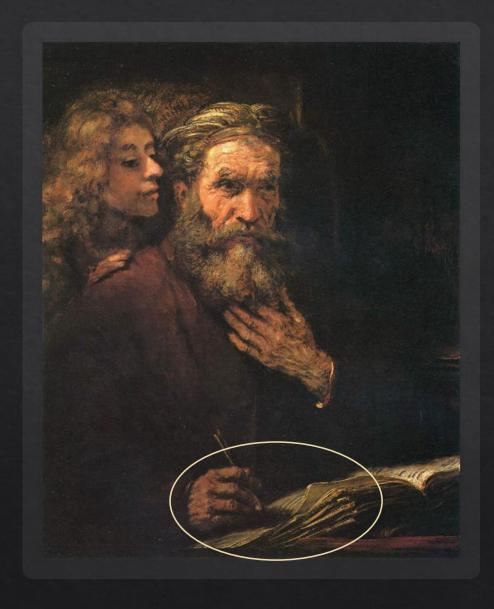
Another main focus of the painting is the angel herself. Lets take a look at the details:
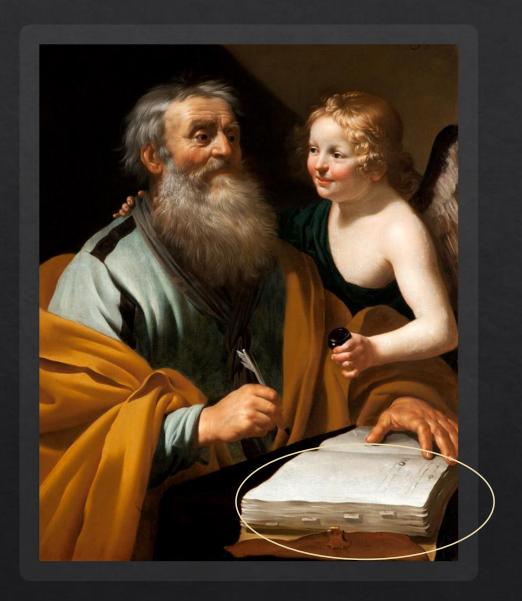
Before the 1900s, angels commonly looked like children in religious paintings with glowing skin and flushed cheeks. Although it was common for angels to be portrayed as such, it is evident through the fact you can see one single wing just before the image is cut. The feathers of the wing look delicate and soft which adds to her complexion. Her skin is as pale as snow which can portray innocence along with the flushed rose colour of her cheeks and nose. The hair looks as if it could move with the highlights and single strokes creating the different layers and strands to give it life. Her eyes are focused on Matthew, smiling while telling him about the events he has to write about. Looking at her hand, you can see she is holding the ink pot which then again, shows how Matthew was meant to document this moment and everything onwards. While Matthew looks shocked and worried, not even making eye contact with the angel on his shoulder, the angel looked content. As if, she already knew that Matthew would follow Jesus and spread the word through his gospel. The highlights on her skin shows where the light is coming from once again, which could be the third party.

Compared to Biljerts angel, Rembrandts representation is a more realistic approach. If you didn't know this painting was about St. Matthew, you would just think this was a scene of a women and a scholar together in his study. The angel is an older woman instead of a child, which personally I prefer more. Her hair is messy and curly, the tones and dept creates the illusion of it being bouncy due to the texture of her hair. The placement of her hand could be seen as her comforting him, while the angle her face is placed makes the interaction more realistic and understood. You can see she is whispering in his ear while looking at him, hand on his shoulder. Her complexion is much darker in tone compared to Biljerts pale, flushed angel. This again shows the different in how another artist creates a religious painting. The angel isn't holding an ink pot nor has wings, there is no extreme highlight to suggest there is a third party or a light source.

Personally I do prefer Rembrandts painting due to the fact it isn't evidently religious. The realistic approach can make the narrative change depending on the viewer, it could be a scholar and a woman, man and daughter, St. Matthew and the angel etc. Another detail in this painting is how it shows St. Matthew holding a pen to paper, you can also see that the pages have already been written on. This can create the narrative of him mid writing the gospel while carefully listening to the angel, if you ever watch a writer or an artist: it is common for those to touch their chin while thinking or looking at their work.

His hands also add to his complexion and age, his hands are dim and full of wrinkles. While Biljerts Matthew doesn't have the excessive amount of lines which deduces the appearance of his age.

Compared to Rembrandts, it is obvious this is a religious painting, with the tones and details. The narrative can't be mistaken for anything other than St. Matthew and the angel. The angel looking at Matthew with reassuring eyes, encouraging him to write while holding the ink pot. It could be debatable as to if he was currently writing the gospel, due to the little amount of writing on the pages. You could say the third party is meant to be noticed even if it isn't in the painting itself, due to the way Matthew is staring at something we cant see.

Matthews hand don't looks as aged as they should be, which adds to the unrealistic nature. You can clearly see where the light is coming from due to the highlights on the angel, Matthews beard and his left hand.