

THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SON



This painting is referenced in the Elementary Encounter Program, specifically the hands of the father.

Rembrandt was widely known for the elements of realism in his paintings, especially those accentuated by light and darkness. The Return of the Prodigal Son was completed in 1669, at the end of his life, and has been praised for the emotional moment that is captured in the scene, as well as the extreme level of detail. The painting perfectly captures the moment of the Prodigal Son's return to his father as he longingly begs for forgiveness at his feet. The father is seen consoling his son as the brother looks on angrily.

Rembrandt leaves little doubt about the son's condition. His head is shaven, that of a prisoner. The clothes are underclothes, barely covering his emaciated body. The soles of his feet tell the story of a long and humiliating journey, of suffering and misery. He still wears the dagger on his belt that he needed to defend himself in the outside world.

Every detail of the father's figure is captured—the light on his facial expression, his posture, the colors of his dress, and, most of all, the still gesture of his hands. The true center of the painting is the hands of the father. It's on them that all the light is concentrated and the eyes of the bystanders are focused. It's upon them that forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing come together. In addition, the hands are quite different. His right hand has a lighter color than the left hand. And, the fingers on the right hand are longer and thinner than those on the left hand. The right hand is feminine, and the left hand is masculine. The reason for these differences has been debated quite a bit over the years, and the main explanation is that the hands represent both the hand of the father and the hand of the mother of the prodigal son as God can assume both roles for us.

It's interesting to compare Rembrandt's interpretation with other artists' interpretations, such as Hicks, Batoni, Beardon, and the Loma Linda University sculpture.

Some content adapted from <https://haventoday.org/return-prodigal-son/>.