Self-portrait, 1660, National Gallery of Victoria.
THIS YEAR we commemorate the three hundredth anniversary of the death of Rembrandt, one of the most original and humane of artists. As well as Rembrandt's self-portrait of 1660, we reproduce here a selection of his drawings.

Rembrandt lived in a period of middle-class individualism, when works of art were for the first time becoming commodities rather than the products of patronage. The Dutch burghers looked to artists to celebrate their new self-esteem and national pride. This was achieved through portraiture, landscape, scenes of social joy or domestic rectitude, and still-life paintings expressing Holland's growing prosperity.

But Rembrandt went beyond these aims. He was influenced by minority sects, broader in sympathies than the prevailing Calvinism. Here he found confirmation of his belief that salvation is for all, embracing not only the prosperous and successful but the lowliest and most despised of men. Within the range of his work he encompassed preachers, beggars, lovers, tradesmen, the aged and infirm, craftsmen, scholars and outcasts. From his reservoir of belief he poured all the warm humanity which shines forth from his paintings and etchings, and illuminates even his slightest sketch.

For the fertile originality of his vision he paid a heavy price. Most collectors in his day expected each artist's individualism to be expressed in readily predictable specialisation in a defined metier — a mode best suited to the operation of the art market.

It is a paradox of history that it was precisely his individuality which put him out of accord with a society which nominally set great store by individualism.

Bankruptcy and isolation led him, however, to greater heights of expression. Often the image of his own face is used to convey the tragic nobility which triumphed over his adversities. Especially in his series of late self-portraits; in his moving treatment of biblical subjects; and in the new profundity he brought to the art of etching he conveyed his deep concern for man as an individual. His message is still valid for us today.
Two Women teaching a Child to Walk, about 1640, red chalk drawing.

Study of a Young Man Asleep, about 1655, ink drawing.