

# ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

ART + AUCTIONS

## Rembrandt Takes Over Museums Around the World

350 years after the Dutch master's death, more than two dozen shows will feature him and his contemporaries, his wife, his times, his social network, his students—and his genius

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Photo: Courtesy of The Leiden Collection, New York.

In the art world, 2019 is the year of the museum megashow, and the star of them is Rembrandt van Rijn. Taken together, the shows dedicated to the Dutch master have all the tropes of the greatest museum exhibitions: the reclusive billionaire making rare loans, the display of some cult objects no one usually gets to see, the fake painting now authenticated, the auction discovery, the internecine competition among rival institutions. There are juicy stories behind the scenes. But on the walls are simply masterpieces, rows upon rows of them, displayed like God's Instagram feed, in institutions as far-flung as Madrid, the United Arab Emirates, London, and the artist's own hometown of Amsterdam.

Ostensibly, it's all part of an anniversary: Rembrandt died 350 years ago this year (he was born in 1606), and several arts institutions, but most notably those in his native Netherlands, are holding competing salutes to him. The Rijkmuseum in Amsterdam's own blockbuster, opening this month, has the audacity to title itself "All the Rembrandts," which is news to the various rival shows that have a whole slew of the painter's most famous ones. (Altogether, he painted about 300 works.) It turns out the Rijkmuseum means all of its own Rembrandts, explains the Louvre Museum's Blaise Ducos, a chief curator in Paris, but: "Oh, well!" he says.



The Louvre Abu Dhabi has just debuted a major, stunning show of work by Rembrandt and Vermeer. Photo: Courtesy of Mohamed Somji.

The truly once-in-a-lifetime one is at the year-old *Louvre Abu Dhabi Museum*, which earlier this month unrolled nearly 100 works by Rembrandt, Vermeer, and his teachers and students, against deep red and purple walls in the halls of architect Jean Nouvel's waterfront dome-topped museum headquarters. Many of the works in the show, which runs through May 18, are on loan from its French parent Louvre and from the Leiden collection (named after Rembrandt's city of birth), put together by low-profile Upper East Side metals billionaire Thomas S. Kaplan and his wife, Dafna Recanati Kaplan. The couple bought anonymously and under the radar until about a year ago, when they went public with their holdings, to jaw-dropping astonishment from the art world. Of Rembrandt, Kaplan says, “He’s the most influential and significant painter in history.”



Antoon François Heijligers, *Interior of the Rembrandt Room in the Mauritshuis in 1884, 1884*.  
Photo: Courtesy of Mauritshuis, The Hague.

Art history texts and critics tend to agree, with the legendary painter praised for his use of light and shadow, his extreme attention to detail, his lasting influence, and the breadth and immediacy of his painting and drawing. Writing this month, critic and British historian Simon Schama waxes quite eloquent on the way that Rembrandt makes faces and figures materially present: “the looser and rougher the paint handling, the more palpable the flesh; the redness of eyelid rims, the puffball of white hair indicated by the freest brushstrokes.”

The artist had something of a roller-coaster career: Early in his life, the ambitious painter started signing his works with one name, aping the masters Leonardo and Michelangelo, and his hubris ended up paying off. He became hugely successful, flush with commissions, ran a studio and school, but ended up bankrupt at 50 after mismanagement of funds and a change in artistic tastes. He died 13 years later, after a fire sale of his possessions, never having left his native country.

Central to all the exhibitions is Rembrandt’s celebrated era, the Dutch “Golden Age.” In the early 17th century, the Dutch republic, freshly independent from Spain, was growing roaringly rich. Worldwide trade led by the Dutch East India Company brought prosperity, and patronage for a whole generation of painters. Artistic excellence and experimentation resulted, especially experiments with the use of color and light, and with a slew of new subjects.

“Domestic scenes, single figures and interiors, middle-class women,” says Lara Yeager-Crasselt, cocurator of the Louvre Abu Dhabi show with Blaise Ducos, were all revolutionary to painting, and their display in that show presents a “jewel box” of art. Vivid and atmospheric yet serene, the huge show immerses you in its time.

Louvre Abu Dhabi also unveils its most recent acquisition, a small, rare oil sketch of the head of Jesus Christ by Rembrandt. The museum paid about \$12 million for it at Sotheby’s, and it’s historically notable because Rembrandt used a model from Amsterdam’s Jewish community. Perhaps rarest of all,



Rembrandt's first works are on view, including examples from a legendary series on the five senses that's like cult catnip for collectors.



Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669), *Minerva in Her Study*, 1635.  
Photo: Courtesy of The Leiden Collection, New York.



Rembrandt van Rijn, *Head of a young man, with clasped hands: Study of the Figure of Christ*, ca. 1648–56.  
Photo: © Louvre Abu Dhabi / Photo by Seeing Things – Ismail Noor.

In June, the Prado in Madrid weighs in with “Velázquez, Rembrandt, Vermeer,” a triple threat of magnificence; at the Hague, the Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis is currently having a “Year of Rembrandt,” presenting 18 works by the artist. (A figure that's up for debate, since the museum notes that some have been deauthenticated by the famously changeable Rembrandt Project gang of experts.) In London, the Dulwich Gallery museum has brought in “award-winning cinematographer Peter Suschitzky, renowned for his work on films such as *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*, “to assist with lighting some of Rembrandt’s greatest paintings, etchings, and drawings.” And this fall, Oxford University’s Ashmolean Museum opens “Young Rembrandt,” featuring some 40 paintings, including the single earliest-known Rembrandt, *Peddler Selling Spectacles (Allegory of Sight)*, circa 1624.

For Rembrandt worshippers, it may be time for a pilgrimage—but they needn't venture very far.