

# The New York Times

## Rembrandt Died 350 Years Ago. Why He Matters Today.



The Rembrandt's "Portrait of Arnold Tholinx" (1656) is displayed as part of "Rembrandt's Social Network" at the Rembrandt House Museum in Amsterdam. Musée Jacquemart-André, Paris. Photograph by Mike Bink/The Rembrandt House.

By Nina Siegal

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AMSTERDAM — How did Rembrandt die? Considering that he is one of the most famous names in art history, it might come as a surprise that we don't know.

He was 63 at the time, but scholars say there is no record of any illness. The poets might say he died of grief, about a year after the death of his only surviving son, Titus.

Although Rembrandt enjoyed worldwide fame in his lifetime, in the end he spent far beyond his means, filed for bankruptcy and was living on a pittance. He was buried in a rented, unmarked grave. Later, his remains were dug up and destroyed, and there is no lasting marker of his resting place.



Rembrandt's portraits of Marten Soolmans, left, and Oopjen Coppit, in the Rijksmuseum's "All the Rembrandts" exhibition. Rijksmuseum.

Let's take a moment to consider Rembrandt's death because it took place 350 years ago this year, in 1669. Museums across the globe, from Amsterdam to the Arabian Gulf, are staging exhibitions to commemorate his extraordinary artistic legacy, and a life that was far from a masterpiece.

With all this renewed focus on this painter, etcher, printmaker, draughtsman, lover, fighter, genius and debtor, it's fair to ask: Who is Rembrandt now? How do we interpret the life and work of the Dutch Golden Age master who knew great fame but also fell out of fashion in his own lifetime, and who has been resurrected again and again by different generations of art lovers who found new meaning in his work?

"Very few people know the story of Rembrandt's life," said Taco Dibbits, director of the Rijksmuseum, the national museum of the Netherlands, which is hosting the celebration's centerpiece exhibition, "All the Rembrandts," through June 10. The museum's entire trove of Rembrandt holdings — 22 paintings, 60 drawings and 300 prints — are all on show. The exhibition is accompanied by the release of a new biography by Jonathan Bicker, "Rembrandt: Life of a Rebel."

"Every generation has its own Rembrandt," said Gregor J.M. Weber, who leads the department of fine and decorative arts at the Rijksmuseum. "Eighty years ago people loved Rembrandt as the old man of the soul, the lonely man reaching the highest point in art," he said. "Now we think he's more or less a rebel, who always invented himself anew, who always changed his way of doing things. He struggled and fought against himself and also against the standards of his time."

"All the Rembrandts" is not a biographical exhibition on the face of it, but it tracks the artist's progress from his early career in Leiden, the Netherlands, to his last paintings, made just days before he died. It begins with a single room of 30 self-portraits that allow us to look into the artist's eyes as he ages from a curly-haired youth of 22 to a graying, concerned-looking 55-year-old. We see how the early sketches and etchings of street beggars, half-naked women and hurdy-gurdy musicians transform later in his career into figures that populate his biblical scenes. And we can compare the tiny portraits of ordinary citizens he scratched into metal plates with the full-scale oil paintings of Amsterdam's merchants and burghers from which he earned his living.

Other exhibitions across the globe span his career, in smaller bites: His early development is traced in "Young Rembrandt 1624-1634" at the Lakenhal Museum in

Leiden (later traveling to the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, England), while his youthful success is explored in “Leiden Circa 1630: Rembrandt Emerges” at the Agnes Etherington Art Center in Ontario, Canada.



“Rembrandt’s Son Titus in a Monk’s Habit,” a painting by Rembrandt from 1660. Rijksmuseum.

At the Rembrandt House Museum in Amsterdam, we learn about the artist's personal connections in "Rembrandt's Social Network: Family, Friends and Acquaintances," and, at the Fries Museum in Leeuwarden, the Netherlands, his romantic life in "Rembrandt and Saskia: Love and Marriage in the Dutch Golden Age." Exhibitions are also taking place throughout the year at the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid, the British Museum in London, the Mauritshuis in The Hague and the Louvre Abu Dhabi, among others.

That so many exhibitions can be held at once is only possible because of Rembrandt's impressive output over a nearly 50-year career, resulting in about 350 paintings, about 300 etchings, and more than 100 drawings.

Thomas S. Kaplan, an American businessman who owns 17 Rembrandts as part of his Leiden Collection, now at the Louvre Abu Dhabi, said in an interview that he saw Rembrandt as "the universal artist" who "unleashed the freedom in other artists to become Expressionists, to become Cubists, to become whatever they wanted to be," as well as, "to show beauty through their own eyes, even if that beauty didn't conform to society's conventions."

Until the 17th century, most European artists, working in the Italian Renaissance tradition, believed that the job of the artist was not just to imitate nature, but to draw out the most beautiful aspects of any subject, and improve on them, Mr. Bicker, Rembrandt's biographer, said.

"One of the reasons he was accused of breaking the rules of art was that he refused to idealize," he said. "Instead of painting or making a print of a beautiful young woman, he would use an ordinary woman, or show an old woman with a lot of wrinkles or a lot of cellulite."

The 17th-century poet and playwright Andries Pels dismissed Rembrandt as "the foremost heretic in art" because "he chose no Greek Venus as his model, but a washerwoman or treader of peat from a barn" he wrote in 1681, according to the Bicker biography. "Flabby breasts, wrenched hands, yes even the marks of corset lacings on the stomach and of stockings around the legs," he continued, sneeringly, "must all be followed, or nature was not satisfied."





Rembrandt's "Self-Portrait With Tousled Hair," from around 1628. Rijksmuseum.

For Mr. Bicker, this is precisely the source of Rembrandt's enduring appeal. "He tried to show the truth and didn't adhere to the laws," of art, he said. He was taking risks, he added, without worrying about whom he offended.

Mr. Weber of the Rijksmuseum shares that view. Rembrandt "approached the sitter very closely," he explained, "and that is the reason that you feel that the man or woman depicted is close to you; it feels like he's made them for you." That's not just true of the

portraits, Mr. Weber continued: “If you look at his Bible scenes you see that he’s doing the same thing: depicting Christ and his disciples as normal people from the neighborhood. You have the feeling that he’s an artist who speaks to you personally.”



Rembrandt’s “Head of a Young Man, With Clasped Hands: Study of the Figure of Christ” at the Louvre Abu Dhabi. Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi; Photograph by Mohamed Somji/Seeing Things.

Mr. Dibbits, the museum's director, said: "Rembrandt is not about impressing, he's about making you feel, making you live that moment. That's a completely different type of rhetorical approach than we were used to from earlier painters. He doesn't monumentalize it; he makes the story internal and makes you feel it. His gods are people, in the end."

If Rembrandt brought painting back down to earth, it may have been because his origins were relatively humble. He was the fifth son of 10 children born to a Leiden miller. The eldest son was to inherit the mill, and Rembrandt was apprenticed to a painter at age 15, and recognized as a prodigy by one of the Netherlands' most powerful art brokers, Constantijn Huygens. In the winter of 1631, at age 26, he moved to Amsterdam to run a painting studio.



Rembrandt drew and painted his only surviving son, Titus, many times. The Mary Frick Jacobs Collection, Baltimore Museum of Art; Photograph by Mike Bink/The Rembrandt House

He married his art dealer's cousin, Saskia van Uylenburgh, a wealthy woman, and together they had four children, only one of whom would survive infancy. After his son



Titus was born, Saskia became ill and died months after giving birth; he delivered his largest and best-known work, “The Night Watch,” just a month later.

Knowing of his fondness for women and his profligacy with money, Saskia had stipulated that he could inherit her fortune only if he never married again. His two subsequent relationships — one with Geertje Dircx, his son’s nanny, and Hendrickje Stoffels, mother of his daughter, Cornelia, both ended tragically.

“A lot of people still see Rembrandt as a genius, which of course he was, but one of the things we see in our museum is that people want to know who he was as a person,” said Lidewij de Koekkoek, the director of the Rembrandt House Museum. “People feel they can relate to him because he had his ups and downs in life and he wasn’t the easiest person to get along with.”

Mr. Dibbits said that what he feels people will understand through all of this year’s exhibitions is that Rembrandt, throughout his life, had “a complete obsession with depicting the world around him as it is.”

“He gets better at it and he gets closer to it as he gets older,” he added. “That’s why we find his late portraits so compelling: It’s because we feel as if we’re looking straight into the person. His work is a tribute to humanity and to us as human beings.”