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“Rembrandt and Vermeer in Abu Dhabi – A Meeting Place for Creative Giants”

95 paintings depicting the most prominent artists of the 17th-century Dutch Golden Age are on display

On a pleasant February afternoon, marked by quiet rain showers, a new exhibition opened at Louvre Abu Dhabi featuring artists who excelled in their use of color, light and shadows. Most of these masters focused on silent and singular moments; with the depiction of man engaged in thoughts and reflection constituting a central theme. Louvre Abu Dhabi decided to make the Dutch Golden Age and its giants – from Rembrandt to Vermeer – the subject of the museum’s first world exhibition.

The exhibition, entitled “Rembrandt, Vermeer and the Dutch Golden Age – Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection and the Musée du Louvre” – includes works from both the Louvre Museum collections and The Leiden Collection in New York. It will run from February 14 to May 18. The show is considered to be the largest exhibition of artists from the 17th-century Dutch Golden Age ever organized in the Arabian Gulf to date. It is also worth mentioning that this year marks the 350th anniversary of Rembrandt’s death. The Dutch master will be celebrated around the world, including in his native country of the Netherlands where the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam will hold a comprehensive exhibition on his career – “All the Rembrandts.”

Rembrandt van Rijn was a rather prolific artist, whose works can now be enjoyed from Amsterdam to Abu Dhabi. The Louvre Abu Dhabi show also features paintings by the master’s teachers and students, with an eye to creating a complete picture of the era during which the renowned Dutchman lived.

The exhibition comprises 95 paintings, sketches and artworks, including over 20 works by Rembrandt and his workshop. It spans the master’s artistic career in the Dutch cities of Leiden and Amsterdam, as well as his relationship with friends and rivals – including Johannes Vermeer, Jan Lievens, Ferdinand Bol, Carel Fabritius, Gerrit Dou, Frans van Mieris, and Frans Hals.

The Dutch Golden Age refers to a short period of the seventeenth century when the newly-formed Dutch Republic, which had just gained independence from the Spanish crown, was considered to be the most prosperous country in Europe – particularly due to extraordinary advances in the realms of trade, science, and the arts. Indeed, international trade led by the Dutch East India Company, together with military developments and great progress in the arts and science, gave the Lowlands – the northwestern coastal region made of Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg – a significant advantage throughout Europe and the world. During that era, Rembrandt van Rijn and Johannes Vermeer stood at the forefront of a new art movement portraying man and his daily life in a more realistic way.

We begin a tour across the halls with Dr. Thomas Kaplan, Founder of The Leiden Collection, and Dr. Lara Yeager-Crasselt, Curator of The Leiden Collection in New York.

Dr. Yeager-Crasselt explains that the exhibition follows Rembrandt’s artistic journey through 15 works from The Leiden Collection, and highlights the development of a specific painting tradition focused on daily life throughout the 17th century in the Netherlands. Works from The Leiden Collection, created by artists known for their meticulous touch and organized in this particular show to facilitate a dialogue between paintings, provide visitors with a glimpse of the cultural exchange movement that characterized the Dutch Golden Age.”

The first piece of the tour is a massive representation of a Dutch warship dating back to 1648 that belongs to the Rijksmuseum. Dr. Kaplan reveals that the ship, which symbolizes Dutch naval power in the 17th century, can also be found in a separate work alongside a small child playing in a pool of water.

The second hall hosts a collection of paintings borrowed from The Leiden Collection and being exhibited together for the first time. The Collection's Curator points to a particular work in the middle of the hall – a small painting that she claims could be placed in the palm of one's hand, *Bust of a Bearded Old Man* (The Leiden Collection). She comments that the painting demonstrates Rembrandt's unique ability in using the small brush and playing with light and shadow. Here, the master depicts an old man with a bent head who is looking far beyond the frame, in a way that gives viewers the impression of actually taking part in the painting. "Its former owner, the American captain of industry Andrew Mellon, created this padded box for the specific purpose of carrying the painting with him everywhere. He truly adored this work and always loved to look at it." Dr. Yeager-Crasselt adds that this painting was probably being exhibited inside of its box for the very first time.

Dr. Kaplan, Founder of The Leiden Collection, points to the various paintings in the room – an assemblage which he sees as a reflection of both the sheer volume of works created by Rembrandt and his workshop, and the creative flow which characterized the Netherlands at that time.

Paintings of people from the community

The works on display evince a departure from religious images and a strong focus on ordinary people. Even when depicting historical figures, the artists aimed to downplay their emblematic status and transform them into real characters. For example, Dr. Yeager-Crasselt points to a painting by Rembrandt which represents the mythical goddess Minerva sitting and reading. She explains that the master painted Minerva in the form of an ordinary Dutch woman, with long hair hanging down her shoulders. "Rembrandt turned a character whom previous artists had stripped of her humanity into a symbolic figure. He gives her familiar features and, through her sitting position at a desk reading a book, succeeds in making her close to the viewer. I believe this particular style speaks volumes about his ability to convey history to us through paintings."

The exhibition traces Rembrandt's artistic journey through a series of famous paintings depicting the senses. These works illustrate the young artist's creativity and skill in drawing features and expressions – a constant from his time in Leiden through to his days in Amsterdam where he created, among others, the famous and highly detailed self-portrait, *Self-Portrait with Shaded Eyes*. The painting is being exhibited alongside other works by some of the greatest artists from Rembrandt's circle, providing a fascinating window into how this group influenced one another's work.

World museums meet at Louvre Abu Dhabi

The show offers visitors the first opportunity to view the Louvre Abu Dhabi's latest acquisition – a work by Rembrandt entitled *Head of a young man, with clasped hands: Study of the figure of Christ* (ca. 1648-56). The painting has elicited significant excitement, following its recent emergence on the art market through an international auction house.

The exhibition offers a unique opportunity to draw inspiration and creativity from some of the greatest artists from the Dutch Golden Age. It also serves as a meeting place for pieces from the Louvre Museum and their "sister paintings" from The Leiden Collection. According to Dr. Kaplan, the process of organizing them side by side in the halls of Louvre Abu Dhabi was "a great joy."

The works on display in the last halls are filled with ordinary people – homemakers, women reading or writing, artists working in their studios, paintings depicting a quiet and calm life. “Their themes are derived from the real world, representing familiar and private moments. Accordingly, we the viewers feel lucky to be allowed to enter the intimacy of these people. This hall emphasizes Dutch values in the mid-17th century, as characterized by abundance and sophistication,” shares Dr. Yeager-Crasselt.

Rose-Marie Mousseaux, Chief Curator of Louvre Abu Dhabi, walks us through the various pieces in the exhibition as part of our interview. She notes that both Vermeer paintings are being displayed side by side for the first time. “There is an additional dimension to our enthusiasm here. Modern scientific research has in fact established – by counting the threads in both paintings – that they were actually painted on canvas cut from the same bolt of cloth. In other words, it’s as if we were looking inside Vermeer’s own studio.” She adds: “Having gathered all of these works in one place, and imagining them in dialogue with one another, is simply amazing.”

When asked why she believes people tend to love paintings from that era, she responds: “I think it is because these works depict scenes and images from a real and realistic society. In the first hall, you will also see a Dutch ship and various maps that illustrate the connections between different parts of the world, such as Asia, India, and Europe. In a way, these objects represent counterparts to today’s means of global communications.”

Vermeer’s mysterious women

Two paintings by Vermeer are on display: *The Lacemaker*, owned by the Louvre, and *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal*, owned by The Leiden Collection. Through them, viewers are able to enjoy the full range his talents – in particular the ability to show the finest details, as with the colorful threads or the serene appearance of the woman at work, or the facial expression of the girl sitting at the piano. While such skills were characteristic of the broader era, Vermeer certainly mastered them. He manages to make silence speak with eloquence and gravity. We look at both women and wonder what exactly is going through The Lacemaker’s mind, what her secrets are, and for whom she is creating that piece. As for the young musician, there may be wonder in the way she looks at us and she may be waiting for us to show appreciation for her playing. But who knows? The total mystery that surrounds the women in Vermeer’s paintings are precisely what makes these works joyful and beautiful. The door is opened for us to be in their presence, yet their silence ultimately leaves us puzzled and confused.