

Minerva in her Study

Following its foundation in 1575, Leiden University was quick to incorporate Roman goddess Minerva in its coat of arms. This explains why Rembrandt's Minerva from 1635 can be seen on the façade of the Academy Building, which has been in use by the University since 1581. This is where, in the Senate Chamber, new students enrolled. Rembrandt himself may have come here to enrol as an arts student on 20 May 1620.

Goddess of wisdom

A woman of flesh and blood with rosy cheeks and long blonde hair: rarely did Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom, war, peace and the arts, look so Dutch as in Rembrandt's depiction of her, despite all the pomp and splendour. Although she may remind us of Rembrandt's wife Saskia, this Minerva is an idealised woman, a character that Rembrandt had already painted before he married Saskia. It is not war but wisdom that takes centre stage in this composition. Minerva is bathed in light. Her hand, which rests on a large book, catches the eye. In the background are more books, a globe and her golden helmet, spear and shield. It is unknown who commissioned this painting.



Rembrandt, 1635, oil on canvas, 138 x 116.5 cm, The Leiden Collection, New York.

University seal

This goddess of not only wisdom but also war was a most fitting symbol for a university in a city that had just been liberated. In the first great seal of the University, we see Minerva reading, with her shield and spear resting on the ground. Stamps of this Minerva were also made, and her image was printed on book bindings, title pages and degree certificates. It is likely that Rembrandt was familiar with the image of this pacifist Minerva in the University coat of arms from his Leiden period. He painted his first known Minerva, for stadholder Frederik Hendrik (who had studied mathematics in Leiden), in around 1631, and his Leiden apprentice Isaac Jouderville also painted this goddess.



The University started using this stamp bearing the image of Minerva for books in 1581, and 444 years after the University's foundation, Minerva still adorns the University's coat of arms. Photo Leiden University Library

