

THE WORLD OF
INTERIORS

EXHIBITION DIGEST

INTERIOR DESIGN (OLD) MASTERS

When it comes to capturing the atmosphere of an interior no-one's ever done it better than Rembrandt, Vermeer and all the rest. Look beyond the sitters in their portraits – as a blockbuster new exhibition in Amsterdam invites us to do – and you'll spot exquisite decorative and architectural details that reveal much about the Dutch Golden Age and daily life

By Ginny Davies

22 April 2025



Cornelis de Man, *Portrait of the Pharmacist Dr Ysbrand Ysbrandsz. (1634/35–1705) in an Interior*, c1667. Image courtesy of The Leiden Collection

‘That’s a lot of Rembrandts,’ says Thomas S. Kaplan as he walks into *From Rembrandt to Vermeer: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection*, which he co-founded. And indeed it is. The exhibition, at the H’Art Museum in Amsterdam, sees the number of works by the great master in the city nearly double. Could there be a better way of celebrating the 750th anniversary of the Venice of the North than by telling its story through 75 paintings by 27 different Dutch masters from the Leiden Collection, named by Kaplan and his wife, Daphne, after the hometown of Rembrandt himself? A closer look at certain interior details of this remarkable collection reveals humanity in all its facets. Together, the paintings explore the exquisite complexity of daily life in 17th-century Amsterdam; from merchants to Minerva, formal portraits of wealthy writers to a humble family meal, set in scenes of Roman columns to whitewashed walls.

Divine damask

Rembrandt van Rijn, *Minerva in her Study*, 1635



Rembrandt van Rijn, *Minerva in her Study*, 1635, oil on canvas, 138 x 116.5cm. Image courtesy of The Leiden Collection

With golden light gracing her alert face, long hair cascading over a heavily embroidered cape, the Olympian deity Minerva is well deserving of her laurel wreath, gold helmet and spear in this imposing masterpiece by Rembrandt. Minerva was the virgin goddess of war, though her divine responsibilities did not end there; she was, paradoxically, goddess of peace, and of wisdom, art, poetry, medicine and crafts, especially spinning and weaving.



Interior detail: damask on the table in *Minerva in her Study*

This last accolade is hinted at in one interior detail expertly rendered by Rembrandt. Below the book on which her hand rests, a heavy damask covers the table in the study. Woven from various materials, most likely here either linen, silk or wool, damask was popularly used by the middle and upper classes in 17th-century Amsterdam for table coverings and other household items. In Holland's flourishing fabrics trading market, bolstered by the Dutch East India Company, weaving centres in Haarlem and Flanders produced this heavily figured fabric. Known for its reversible patterned design, damask often interlaces silk or satin to give a lustrous effect, such as the orangey-red example basking here in the afterglow of Rembrandt's golden-lit goddess.

Dutch rush weaving

Jan Steen, *Prayer Before the Meal*, 1660



Jan Steen, *Prayer Before the Meal*, 1660, oil on oak panel, 54.3 x 46cm. Image courtesy of The Leiden Collection

Quiet spirituality emanates from the family scene depicted here by Jan Steen. Plain clothes, a simple meal and bare walls are not the only indications of the family's piety and modest means; the furniture is further confirmation. Specifically, the traditional 17th-century spindle-back Dutch chair on which the father sits shows that the family live by the creed above his head: 'Three things I desire and no more / Above all to love God the Father / Not to covet an abundance of riches / But to desire what the wisest prayed for / An honest life in this vale / In these three all is based.' The rush seat of the chair is typical of the era for this particular domestic setting, and is a detail that further emphasises the family's humble status. A cheaper and practical alternative to upholstered chairs, rush a material was readily available and easily harvested from the wetlands.



Interior detail: spindle back chair in *Prayer Before the Meal*



Interior detail: inscribed *belkroon* and creed in *Prayer Before the Meal*

The painting also features a *belkroon*, roughly translating as ‘bell crown’, a small chandelier with a bell in the centre. In 17th-century Holland, a *belkroon* would often be adorned, as this one is, with a leafy branch, symbolising the sanctity of marriage. Telling of the spirituality of this home, it is inscribed with the words from the Lord’s prayer: ‘*u wille moet geschieden*’ (thy will be done).

Cartes-à-figures and cartography (concealing delftware)

Cornelis de Man, *Portrait of the Pharmacist Dr. Ysbrand Ysbrandsz (1634/35–1705) in an Interior*, 1667



Cornelis de Man, *Portrait of the Pharmacist Dr Ysbrand Ysbrandsz. (1634/35–1705) in an Interior*, c1667, oil on canvas, 58.2 x 49.7cm. Image courtesy of The Leiden Collection

The interior mentioned in the title of Cornelis de Man's painting tells us much about the social status of Dr Ysbrand Ysbrandsz, a pharmacist from a prominent Rotterdam family. De Man alludes to the interests and accolades of this notable Dutch figure through the objects arranged on the table, with one interior detail of particular note. The celestial globe is a nod to his father, who had a successful career in the Dutch East India Company, and is an homage to his wife, Maria Blaeu. Maria came from a family of internationally famous cartographers; her grandfather Willem Jansz Blaeu and uncle Joan Blaeu were both world renowned for the beauty and forensic accuracy of their maps. The example in this painting is no exception, with cartes-à-figures curving across the sphere, illustrations and allegorical figures typical of the era.



Interior detail: delftware tiles peeking out from behind the celestial globe in *Portrait of the Pharmacist Dr Ysbrand Ysbrandsz* (1634/35–1705) in *an Interior*

Analysing the globe reveals the delft tiles lining the wall, just visible behind it. Here, De Man, who hailed from the same town as the famous blue-and-white glazed earthenware, Delft, subtly includes tiles depicting Dutch daily life. Inspired by the popular Chinese porcelain of Jingdezhen, delftware was of particular prominence during the Dutch Golden Age, commonly adorned with vignettes of daily life, such as those seen in the shadows of *Portrait of the Pharmacist*, scenes from the Bible and sometimes mythological creatures.

Hourglass book rest

Gerrit Dou, *Scholar Sharpening His Quill*, c1632–35



Scholar Sharpening His Quill, ca. 1632-35, Gerrit Dou (1613 – 1675), oil on oval panel, 26.3 x 21.2 cm. Image courtesy of The Leiden Collection

Painted shortly after Dou's training with Rembrandt, the precise, concentrated expression and pose of the subject of *Scholar Sharpening His Pen*, an elderly man balancing the tip of the quill against the tip of his thumb as he applies pressure from the blade, distracts initially from the open book sitting before him. The text in this instance is, however, less noteworthy than the object propping it up: an hourglass. Lent askew, the hourglass in this context hints at the scholar's lack of anxiety over the transience of life and time.



Detail view: the hourglass in Dou's *Scholar Sharpening His Quill*

Often depicted alongside skulls and candles, the hourglass was a symbol commonly used as a poignant reminder of life and its limits by the old masters. The 17th-century saw a growing interest in accurate time-keeping, and hourglasses, such as the one acting as a book rest here, became a common tool in daily life in Amsterdam, particularly in trade, though they didn't always contain sand. The wooden frame and glass here may house powdered marble, tin or lead oxides, or burnt eggshells.

Referential Corinthian columns

Gabriel Metsu, *Elegant Lady Writing at Her Desk*, c1662–64



Gabriel Metsu, *Elegant Lady Writing at Her Desk*, c1662–64, oil on panel, 39.4 x 33.5cm. Image courtesy of The Leiden Collection

A prolific painter of letter-writers, Gabriel Metsu drew inspiration for this subject from Gerard ter Borch. Along with several contemporaries, including Caspar Netscher, Frans van Mieris and Johannes Vermeer, his compositions of pensive female subjects were arguably influenced most by Ter Borch's *A Woman Writing a Letter*, c1655–56.



Interior detail: Corinthian columns, based on the ones designed by Jacob van Campen in Amsterdam's Town Hall, in *Elegant Lady Writing at Her Desk*

Here, the elegant woman's status in 17th-century Dutch society is made clear by the opulence surrounding her. She is placed in front of a white-and-red marble mantelpiece, whose Corinthian columns and carved cornice is based on the chimneypiece inside the Burgomasters' Council Chamber of the Amsterdam Town Hall, designed by Jacob van Campen. Such columns were a key feature of the town hall, an architectural device used to present Amsterdam as the new Rome. Situating his subject before this grand architectural reference tells viewers that this woman very much belongs to the elite of Dutch society.

White-washed wall

Johannes Vermeer, *Young Girl Seated at a Virginal*, c1672–75



Johannes Vermeer, *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal*, c1672–75, oil on canvas, 25.5 x 20.1cm. Image courtesy of The Leiden Collection

The exhibition's unassuming showstopper, Johannes Vermeer's *Young Girl Seated at a Virginal*, is remarkable not for any particular interior detail, but for the lack thereof. The Dutch ebony frame that has recently replaced the gaudy gold number in which it was sold at Sotheby's in 2004 is much more in keeping with the modest masterpiece. The blank wall and simple blue upholstered chair are at odds with the small beads and red ribbons in her hair, and satin clothing. Her attire and pastime of choice, playing the virginal, suggest a wealthy girl in a composition typical of this era of Dutch painting; her surroundings, however, do not. By placing the woman at the front of the painting, in this plain setting, Vermeer draws all attention to her and the virginal, an instrument whose quiet tones are best heard in close proximity. The lack of distraction from interior details emphasises the intimacy of the moment captured here by Vermeer.