

SunSentinel

TRAVEL & LIFE

A BLOCKBUSTER NEW SHOW



Part of the exhibit, Carel Fabritius' "Hagar and the Angel," the largest painting in the exhibit, recounts the Book of Genesis narrative of Hagar and her son, Ishmael.

THE LEIDEN COLLECTION, NEW YORK



Gerrit Dou's oil painting, "Herring Seller and Boy," created circa 1664. **DOMINIQUE SURH AND THE LEIDEN COLLECTION, NEW YORK**



"Self-Portrait with Shaded Eyes" is one of 17 Rembrandts that form the centerpiece of the Norton Museum's new 17th-century Dutch masters exhibit, "Art and Life in Rembrandt's Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection." **DOMINIQUE SURH AND THE LEIDEN COLLECTION, NEW YORK**



Rembrandt van Rijn's "Unconscious Patient (Allegory of Smell)," an early work he painted as a teenager in Leiden, the Netherlands.

THE LEIDEN COLLECTION, NEW YORK



Rembrandt van Rijn's 1635 painting, "Minerva in Her Study," captures the titular Roman goddess of war and wisdom.

THE LEIDEN COLLECTION, NEW YORK

In US first, 17 Rembrandts to be displayed at Norton Museum

By Phillip Valys | South Florida Sun Sentinel

When a billionaire couple unveiled their trove of Rembrandts in Amsterdam this spring, the artist's hometown suddenly had nearly twice as many of his masterpieces.

That's because their 17 paintings, which rival the 22 in Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum, make up the world's largest collection of Rembrandts in private hands.

And lucky for us: Starting this month, this cache will form the backbone of the Norton Museum of Art's new blockbuster show, "Art and Life in Rembrandt's Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection."

The Rembrandts are the center of gravity in this survey of 75 paintings by 27 Dutch Golden Age

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Rembrandt

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artists, all contemporaries and disciples of the famed painter, etcher, printmaker and drafter. Taken together, The Leiden Collection — owned by Thomas Kaplan and Daphne Recanati Kaplan — traces daily life in 17th-century Amsterdam, from portraits of merchant sitters and the Roman deity Minerva to humble family meals in messy Dutch homes.

While a few “Art & Life” masterworks are pre-1630, the majority were painted in Amsterdam after 1631, the year Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669) moved from Leiden, his birthplace, to open a painting studio in the booming business and trade capital. Here, Rembrandt had the freedom to express beauty in a staunchly personal style, completely original in his time, and he gave that same permission to the pupils who plied their trade in Rembrandt’s workshop — Gerrit Dou, Jan Steen, Arent de Gelder — and his contemporaries, like Johannes Vermeer.

It’s no wonder that the

show, stuffed with paintings worth tens of millions of dollars, stands among the most valuable exhibits the Norton has ever presented, if you ask J. Rachel Gustafson, the museum’s chief curatorial officer. (Although the Norton’s 2022 exhibit, “Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera and Mexican Modernism from the Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection,” may come close in scale and value.)

“I can’t think of another museum showing paintings by artists of this caliber in Florida,” she said. “It’s a big deal for us. It’s a beautiful show that’s rare to see.”

That it’s the U.S. debut of “Art & Life” makes viewing the collection an even rarer experience, Gustafson added.

How did the Norton get so lucky? Credit Thomas Kaplan’s origins: The New York collector lived in Fort Lauderdale from age 8 until 16, before shipping off to a Swiss boarding school. And credit a Norton trustee, philanthropist Daisy Soros — widow of Paul Soros, George Soros’ older brother — for introducing him to Norton director Ghislain d’Humieres at an event

three years ago, Gustafson said.

“Art & Life” will take over the Norton’s third floor and span 11 themed sections exploring vignettes of daily life, quiet spirituality in Calvinist homes, and public markets and kitchens from artists including Frans Hals, Jan Lievens, Gabriel Metsu and Frans van Mieris. It was a prosperous era in Amsterdam, although the phrase “Dutch Golden Age” is stuffy and problematic these days, Gustafson said. While the Dutch West India Company helped the Netherlands expand commerce and muster the military to fight Spain and Portugal during the Eighty Years War, it also participated in the transatlantic slave trade.

To access the full show, patrons will have to pass two showstoppers, which greet them the moment they reach the third floor: Carel Fabritius’ “Hagar and the Angel” and Rembrandt’s own “Minerva in Her Study.” Both belong to a highly collected category the Dutch back then called “history paintings,” a regrettable phrase for works fixed on Old Testament stories, mythology

and allegory, Gustafson said.

“You see the word ‘history,’ you might think of historical battles,” she said. “Even if it’s not the true past, it tells a story, right?”

Fabritius painted his deeply moving masterpiece “Hagar and the Angel” around 1645 after finishing his apprenticeship in Rembrandt’s studio. It captures the Book of Genesis narrative of Hagar and son Ishmael, who were expelled from Abraham’s house to wander the wilderness. And so Hagar prays to end her son’s suffering. In Fabritius’ work, an angel appears before the weeping Hagar, ensconced in a halo of light as ominous shadows surround them, thick with tension. It’s one of five surviving history paintings from Fabritius’ career, tragically cut short when a gunpowder store exploded in the city of Delft in 1654. That explosion killed more than 100 people, including Fabritius, and incinerated many of his paintings.

The other showstopper, “Minerva in Her Study,” is considered the “Mona Lisa” of the Kaplans’ Rembrandt trove, said Elizabeth

Nogrady, the Leiden Collection’s chief curator.

The Minerva image may strike awe, because the Roman goddess of war and wisdom is usually represented as a statuesque stick figure in magisterial flowing robes, a soldier’s helm and spear. Yet here, Rembrandt has preserved her glory in light and shadow while turning the deity into a doughy presence. Crowned and wearing a large golden cloak, Minerva is broad-jawed and bookish with tired, wizened eyes and looks so pensive she makes thinking itself seem like a dramatic activity.

“She’s a goddess of war and peace, but she’s turning her back to war objects like the golden helmet, and her hand is on a book, a peaceful activity,” Gustafson said. “This is a goddess taking a break. The original audience that saw this work was so tired of the war with Spain, so this is a hopeful painting, closing the chapter on war and looking to a peaceful future.”

If Italian Renaissance painters thought the job of art was to idealize nature, draw out a subject’s beauty and improve upon it, Rembrandt stripped away

all the elegance and artifice, Nogrady said. Such was Rembrandt’s style — introducing realism to the 17th century — that he turned a Roman goddess into a domestic one, Nogrady said.

“(Minerva) could be based on a woman he saw at the local market,” Nogrady said. “Rembrandt truly comes into his own with these explorations of painting people in his neighborhood, people who worked and lived in the Jewish Quarter he lived near. He’s constantly doing oil sketches and drawings and taking in the world around him. Whether it’s Minerva’s crease under the eye or wild hair, he’s hitting both targets at once, the spiritual and the universal.”

IF YOU GO

What: “Art and Life in Rembrandt’s Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection”
When: Oct. 25, 2025–March 29, 2026
Where: Norton Museum of Art, 1450 S. Dixie Highway, West Palm Beach
Cost: \$18, \$15 for seniors, free for guests age 12 and younger
Information: 561-832-5196; Norton.org