

## Rembrandt Rules at the Norton Museum in West Palm Beach



**Left:** Rembrandt van Rijn, *Young Girl in a Gold-Trimmed Cloak*, 1632, oil on oval panel. **Center:** Rembrandt van Rijn, *Minerva in Her Study*, 1635, oil on canvas. **Right:** Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait with Shaded Eyes*, 1634, oil on panel. (The Leiden Collection, New York)

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Seventeen Rembrandts, masterpieces by his best students, and the Leiden Collection, a pioneer in philanthropy

**G**REETINGS from freedom-loving, balmy Florida, and from Palm Beach at that. I'm here for the William F. Buckley Prize dinner, enhanced this year by the 100th anniversary of Buckley's birth and the 70th anniversary of NATIONAL REVIEW. There are many reasons to be in Florida, especially for New Yorkers looking with chagrin at the looming Mamdani mayoralty. He's the apotheosis of identity politics and Obama's Faculty Lounge, set to a bad rap video.

South Florida has absorbed lots of refugees from the Acela Corridor, not exactly poor and huddled masses but, at least in Palm Beach, word on the street is “more are on the way.” There’s the weather, lovely for at least six months out of the year, ocean breezes, low taxes, good roads, great schools, and the best governance in the country. And no Sharia law!



**Left:** Frans Hals, *Portrait of Samuel Ampzing*, 1630, oil on copper. **Center:** Jan Lievens, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1629–1630, oil on panel. **Right:** Johannes Vermeer, *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal*, 1670–1675, oil on canvas. (The Leiden Collection, New York)

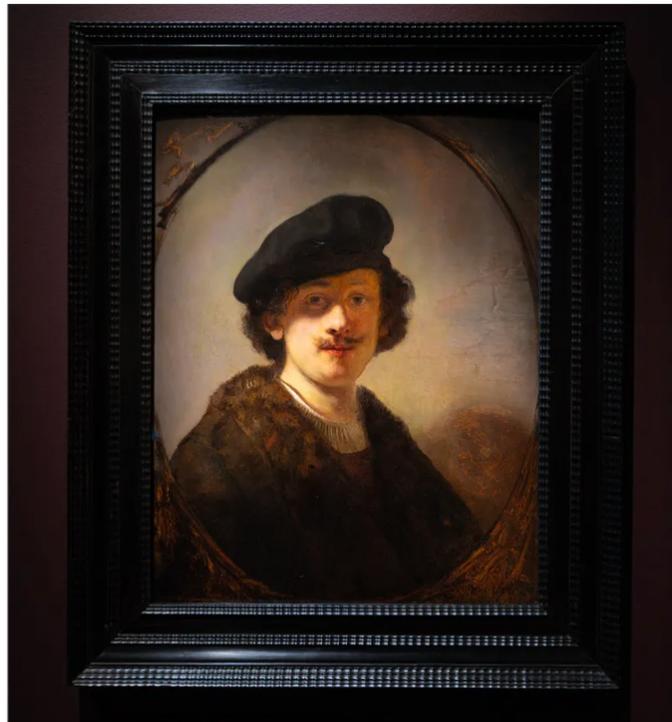
Then there’s *Art and Life in Rembrandt’s Time: Masterpieces from the Leiden Collection*, the awesome new exhibition at the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach. It’s 76 paintings, among them 17 by Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669), all rarely seen. I’ll write two stories: a primer on Rembrandt this week; next week on Rembrandt as a teacher of a dozen or so students who, together with him, Vermeer, Hals, and two or three others, built what we call the Dutch Golden Age. They’re well represented in the show with first-rate work. *Rembrandt’s Time* is worth getting on a plane. The Norton is only a few minutes’ drive from the airport in West Palm Beach.

Rembrandt was born and raised in Leiden, a small Dutch city that for centuries was a university, publishing, and textile town. Rembrandt's father owned a prosperous mill business there. He did well as a student at the University of Leiden, having a classical education, but veered toward art. He studied with Jacob van Swanenberg, a painter of apocalyptic scenes, a Northern European specialty, enriched with Italian flair during the nearly 20 years he spent in Italy. Around 1631, Rembrandt decided to try his hand as an artist in Amsterdam, the heart of the new Dutch Republic.



Map of Amsterdam — Joan Blaeu, *A new drawing of Amsterdam's famous Dutch market*, 1649, hand-colored engraving. (Public domain/via Wikimedia)

What was Amsterdam? It just celebrated its 750th anniversary last year, so it's old but, in 1631, was what we'd call new and improved. For one thing, the smell of canal water was replaced by the smell of printer's ink. It was among the newest and most sophisticated publishing centers of all of Europe, with nearly universal literacy, libraries, and literary salons. A city at peace amid Europe's many war zones, Amsterdam was a magnet for immigration, not among peasants, drug cartels, and Chinese spies, as America has been for the past few years, but among intellectuals, merchants, investors, and movers and shakers. What attracted them was Amsterdam's nascent free market economy, intellectual vibrancy, freshly minted Protestant work ethic, and renown for what we'd call religious tolerance — hardly of the Unitarian variety, but, in the city, Jews, Catholics, most stripes of Protestants, and a Muslim or two weren't at each other's throats and worked together.



Framed view of Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait with Shaded Eyes*, 1634, oil on panel. (The Leiden Collection, New York)

The first gallery of *Rembrandt's Time* is set for a feast, the host of which is the young, ambitious, poised Rembrandt. Rembrandt did around 40 self-portrait paintings and 30 etchings from the early 1630s into the 1660s. That's a lot of self-portraits. *Self-Portrait with Shaded Eyes*, from 1634, is there. Rembrandt wasn't a narcissist particularly. He started doing self-portrait etchings as expression studies — grimacing, smiling, one with a smoky, sultry stare — for practice. He was, after all, the cheapest model he could find. *Self-Portrait with Shaded Eyes* is of a different magnitude. It's a good introduction to Rembrandt's self-portraits and, overall, his portraiture style. His gaze is direct. He's handsome, poised, and polished.

He's up-and-coming, too, with enough success under his belt for a fur-trimmed robe and fashionable mustache.

He's no crazy freak artist. Rather, he's a safe pair of hands insofar as his message to viewers. His beret is old-fashioned. Rembrandt married in 1634, so, possibly, this portrait was meant to convince his new wife, or the girl of his dreams if he was still wooing her and her prosperous family, that he was a good bet. Rembrandt never puts all his cards on the table, though. His beret casts a shadow over his eyes, not suggesting he's shifty and furtive but, rather, that he's got a dash of enigma. He'd never be a bore.

That he offers a touch of inscrutability reflects Rembrandt's art philosophy but also his zeitgeist. In Leiden and in Amsterdam, it was possible to live a life of the mind, to be a thinker as well as a doer. Most portraiture in the 16th century and the early years of Rembrandt's century projected power and status. As lovely as the portraits of Titian, Tintoretto, Raphael, and, closer to his time, Van Dyke are, they're less about psychology and inner life and more about grandeur and hauteur. Rembrandt didn't aim to bore into the psychology of his sitters, but he suggests that inner workings vary from individual to individual, with ample room for mystique.

Over time, Rembrandt's self-portraits become an autobiography. We see him age, we see him have fun, dress up as a sultan, wear a helmet, pose as the Prodigal Son, and, in the 1650s and '60s, sag and sadden.

A few steps from the self-portrait is *Minerva in Her Study*, from 1635, among Rembrandt's early blockbusters, an impressively large mythological picture. It depicts the Roman goddess Minerva, whose jurisdictions were war, arts and crafts, and wisdom. Like Rembrandt, Minerva was born a savant and prodigy, springing from Jupiter's forehead fully formed. She has presence, clearly, with the physique of Brunnhilde, and, packed as it is with her elaborate robes and extensive iconography, *Minerva* makes his self-portrait seem spartan.

It's a showstopper that fills the wall at the end of the gallery, opposite the entrance, with plush red drapery above it. As soon as I saw it, I knew that *Rembrandt's Time* would present the very best. From the 1620s, Rembrandt, well aware of his talent and steeped in the classics and history, saw his future as a painter of history, myth, and biblical dramas, treating stories central to civilization's emergence and refinement. Before he was 30, he'd arrived. *Minerva* is grand, she doesn't toss her war iconography in the trash but has put it aside, donned a laurel, a symbol of erudition, and cracks open a book as monumental as she is. She has embraced a life of the mind, and it suits her. She's a mythological ideal for Rembrandt but also an implicit icon for Amsterdam. In the mid-1630s, Europe's warring powers tried to enlist the Dutch Republic to join the blood sports on one side or the other. "We'll pass," Rembrandt submits.

The Leiden Collection is the private collection of Tom and Daphne Kaplan. Over the last 20 or so years, not a long time, the Kaplans have assembled a sublime Dutch Golden Age collection, making daring and fabulous purchases in a market that's hundreds of years old. Tom was first smitten by Rembrandt as a child, having seen his work in New York museums. Though American, he went to Oxford as an undergraduate and for his Ph.D. He started his career as an analyst focusing on Israeli businesses in the U.S. Daphne grew up in Israel and got the collecting bug first, assembling a collection on 20th-century Modernist design. Tom's fortune comes from mining, but money begets money.

Tom assumed that all the Dutch Golden Age art worth collecting was already in museums, but, no, even though Rembrandt did only about 300 paintings over a 40-year career, his oeuvre is more open-ended than one would think. New attributions aren't being made every day, but they happen. *Self-Portrait with Shaded Eyes*, and this is not the wildest example, was entirely overpainted in the 17th century by another artist who had no idea he was covering a Rembrandt with a freaky portrait of a man, also having a moustache but wearing a Polish hat shaped like a crown, a thick fur coat, and a gold chain. It wasn't until sometime between the 1950s and 1980s that the overpainted hat was analyzed and removed, probably because the paint was flaking. A smart, adventurous owner and conservator removed it, revealing a curious beret. In the 1990s, all the overpainting was removed, and there was Rembrandt. The gambling mogul Steve Wynn owned it. The Kaplans made him an offer he couldn't refuse.

As collectors of great means working with old-time dealers good at smoking art out, the Kaplans built a collection of more than 200 objects, many made by artists with a Leiden connection. Rather than hide their art at home, they've formed what they call a lending library, supporting exhibitions and scholarship. *Rembrandt's Time* is only at the Norton. What a coup for this lovely museum, one of the best in the Southeast, with a nice building and a superb photography and American Modernism collection. But, let's face it, the Norton, like many museums in the South, parts of the Midwest, and the Mountain states, missed the boat when Old Master paintings were plentiful and, usually, cheap. Northeast museums mostly had hoovered them up.

The Kaplans understand this, so they agreed, as the best philanthropists would, to send a show of their treasures to a place where it would have the greatest impact. The art world is small. The Norton has friends in high places, friends like Ken Griffin, a transplant to Florida who, tired of bad business climates in Chicago and New York, relocated not only himself and his businesses but his largesse to his new home. A few years ago, he funded the Norton's new wing. Of course, Palm Beach, a hop, skip, and a jump from the Norton, is no slouch for VIPs. And the Norton is very, very good at networking.



Left: Rembrandt van Rijn, *Study of a Woman in a White Cap*, c. 1640, oil on panel. Center: Rembrandt van Rijn, *Portrait of a Man in a Red Coat*, 1633, oil on oval panel. Right: Rembrandt van Rijn, *Young Girl in a Gold-Trimmed Cloak*, 1632, oil on oval panel. (The Leiden Collection, New York)

Rembrandt's portraits style evolves. *Young Girl in a Gold-Trimmed Coat*, from 1632, is very lovely, her face like porcelain, her red hair frizzy, and ear drops, pearl necklace, and gold-braided coat delicate indeed, but her eyes penetrate us. Does she judge us?

She's too cool a cat for us to know. Rembrandt's early style is focused and crisp rather than gauzy. It's not a portrait of someone we know, though Rembrandt used her as a model — we see her face in other work by Rembrandt and his students. He might have painted it as a fantasy portrait. Her dress isn't au courant. It's late 16th century, investing it with a touch of nostalgia. The painting's famous. It was on long-term loan to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts when it was stolen in 1975. A year later, the painting was recovered and returned to the MFA, where it remained until the owners put it up for auction.

*Portrait of a Man in a Red Coat*, from 1633, is meticulously painted as well, but his red coat is sketchier.

Rembrandt's classic lighting is here, too, with his face partly in the dark for a mysterious touch. His white collar on the left side is brightly lit against a dark background while the right side is dark juxtaposed against a lighter background, creating depth.

*Study of a Woman in a White Cap*, from 1640, depicts a servant in profile. She's no idealized servant but someone Rembrandt knew. It's a portrait, but it's also a still life of her cap and her cheek. The prong sticking from her cap is an ear iron, a band keeping the cap tightly in place. She's worn it for so long that there's a crease on her cheek.

Rembrandt is making a statement in so scrupulously depicting her. Amsterdam was, in Rembrandt's time, as egalitarian a place as could be found in Europe before the Enlightenment and subsequent revolutions. Though a servant, she's first and foremost a unique individual in whom Rembrandt invests dignity and, in presenting her in profile, an inner life we can't see.



**Left:** Rembrandt van Rijn, *Portrait of a Seated Woman with Her Hands Clasped*, 1660, oil on canvas. **Center:** Caspar Netscher, *Portrait of Susanna Doublet Huygens*, 1669, oil on panel. **Right:** Rembrandt van Rijn, *Bust of a Young Bearded Man*, 1656–1658, oil on panel with arched top. (The Leiden Collection, New York)

Rembrandt's late portrait style is the artist at what I'd call his most modern. *Bust of a Young Bearded Man* is from between 1656 and 1658. Like *Woman in a White Cap*, it's small, about 15 by 11 inches, but, unlike his earlier portraits, his coat and background are layered in paint to form an abstract, obscure field of browns, not muddy but modeling his body and background. Rembrandt is after the man's eyes, nose, and mob of dark curls. He leans forward and looks down, but the use of quickly brushed ochre and pink paint gives him expressive movement. Touches of red on his lips suggest that he's about to speak.

Who is he? We don't know but he might have been one of Rembrandt's Ashkenazi Jewish neighbors. Rembrandt and other Dutch artists loved painting figures we call tronies, not portraits but types — old and spent, street scamps, drunks, Jews, poor, not caricatures but figures who seem real but weren't painted for specificity. Often Rembrandt would see them as studies to be inserted among many other figures in complicated religious or history scenes.

Painted in 1660, *Study of a Seated Woman with Her Hands Clasped* ends Rembrandt's career insofar as art in the Leiden Collection.

Rembrandt depicted old people starting in the 1630s, but more and more in the 1650s until his death. This picture, like his late self-portraits, is frank and nuanced, sad rather than happy, but with so many juxtapositions that we can't say she's spent and waiting to die. Her rugged face, baggy, mottled cheeks, and prominent nose and chin give a look of experience but also durability. She might be physically depleted and alone with her thoughts, but she's engaged and alert, if only when it comes to memories. It's heavy on brown like *Bust of a Young Bearded Man*, but it isn't monochromatic. Her face and veined hands have dabs of pink, white, red, and yellow. Does Rembrandt's end-of-life style reflect his personal life? By his old age, he'd buried two wives and all his children and gone bankrupt. A materialist and bon vivant who lived well and collected art and fine furnishings, he went bankrupt in 1658 and saw his house emptied by repo men.

Starting in the 18th century, Rembrandt's renown as a visionary soared, but when he died in 1669, he was very much out of style. His etchings were always much coveted, but his late pictures like *Seated Woman with Her Hands Clasped* were too abstract, too brown, too drab, and too cryptic. Highbrow taste aimed at fancy dress, bright color, and projections of affluence, however empty-headed the subjects looked. Caspar Netscher's 1669 portrait of Susanna Huygens is steps from *Bust of a Young Bearded Man*. Netscher's picture is the epitome of the new style. It looks like a Van Dyke.

*Rembrandt's Time* is the meatiest, most elegant, and most beautifully presented exhibition I've seen in a long time. It's focused art history with lots of new nuggets discovered by the Kaplans and their curators — there's the thrill of new discoveries. Rembrandt died more than 350 years ago, but there are still mysteries to be solved and enigmas to be unpuzzled.