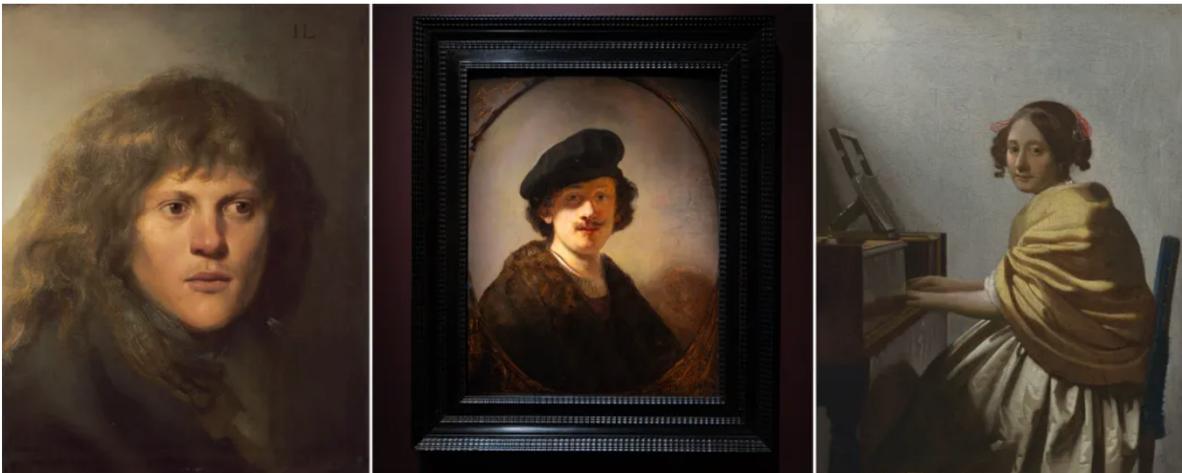


NATIONAL REVIEW

Learning from Rembrandt at Florida's Norton Museum of Art

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Three masterpieces from *Art and Life in Rembrandt's Time* show sometimes overlapping, sometimes parallel visions. **Left:** Jan Lievens, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1629–1630, oil on panel. **Center:** Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait with Shaded Eyes*, 1634, oil on panel. **Right:** Johannes Vermeer, *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal*, c. 1670–1675, oil on canvas. (The Leiden Collection, New York)

He nurtured plenty of talented students whose work is on view along with the only Vermeer in private hands.

LAST week, in reviewing *Art and Life in Rembrandt's Time*, just opened and full of wonders at the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach, I dwelled on the 17 Rembrandt paintings in the exhibition, all from the private Leiden Collection that's so rarely seen. Scholars and fans of Rembrandt (1606–1669) don't often consider him in his role as a teacher, which is what I'm focusing on today. Rembrandt had many students over 40 years, some of whom became accomplished artists. We can't call them followers of Rembrandt. Lots of the art in *Rembrandt's Time* comes from Jan Lievens, Rembrandt's peer and fellow student in the 1620s; and Rembrandt's own students, including the divine Carel Fabritius, Gerrit Dou, and Arent de Gelder, each inspired by Rembrandt to develop his own vision. That was a central part of Rembrandt's pedagogy.

Rembrandt's Time is astutely curated to keep the surprises coming. It doesn't begin with Rembrandt, the star attraction, but with self-portraits by Jan Lievens (1607–1675) and, we think, Dou (1613–1675). Dou shows himself to be a young, unassuming, but ambitious artist, dwarfed by his large canvas. He wants to be a history painter, judging from the size and shape of the canvas, which suggests a complicated narrative, and his trunk full of props used to dress his models. Lievens's self-portrait puts a confident, high-spirited, bold, and brash artist before us. Both artists strive for character, self-awareness, and self-assertion.

As artists go, Rembrandt was prolific in producing self-portraits, nearly a hundred of them in paintings and etchings over his entire career. "Know thyself" isn't just another Delphic slogan. For Rembrandt and his circle, it meant probing the soul and thoughts of their subjects and depicting a sense of inner life. This was a giant part of Rembrandt's pedagogy. A good artist isn't a hack but a master storyteller and a bit of a mind reader.

Lievens and Rembrandt shared a studio in Leiden for five years and were such close friends and spirits that their early work has been attributed to each other over the years. As we can see from their two self-portraits in the show, Lievens was by far the swashbuckler, suave like Rembrandt but a daredevil. They had different trajectories, too. Lievens found a royal and aristocratic clientele in London and Antwerp, where he eventually settled, and The Hague and Berlin, where he was a court painter.



Left: Gerrit Dou, *Cat Crouching on the Ledge of an Artist's Atelier*, 1657, oil on panel. (The Leiden Collection, New York) **Right:** Jan Lievens, *Boy in a Cape and Turban (Portrait of Prince Rupert of the Palatinate)*, c. 1631, oil on panel. (Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach)

In 1631, when Rembrandt was moving to Amsterdam, Lievens painted *Boy in a Cape and Turban*, a shimmering portrait of Prince Rupert of the Palatinate dressed as a sultan. Rembrandt painted himself in Oriental costumes and certainly did lots of biblical scenes, but Lievens had the palette and dash of Van Dyck. Dou, a Rembrandt student in Leiden, painted meticulous, polished surfaces, as did Rembrandt as a young man, and did portraits and scenes of everyday life, often in evening settings. His shadows are wonderful. His textures have a miniaturist sheen and sparkle.

Having two cats, I love Dou's *Cat Crouching on the Ledge of an Artist's Atelier*, from 1657. Dou did lots of niche pictures — the scene is enclosed and tucked in — but this one stars a cat. Dou's brushes were perfect for detail because he made them himself. Here he used one with four or five bristles, allowing him to create the look of an iridescent curtain and plush, polychromatic fur. People had cats as pets as well as mousers then, but they were thought to be naturally mysterious and tuned to all things occult. And who knows what a cat's thinking? *Cat Crouching* is a self-portrait, too, since Dou is deep in the darkness, working at his easel.

Rembrandt was a pioneer in the art of interiority, and his students understood that. He balances a good likeness, narrative nuance, mystery, and inscrutability. He and his students were less concerned with status and projections of power than were the heavy-hitter portraitists who came before them. Holland in Rembrandt's time, of course, was among the most egalitarian of places, but Rembrandt was the anchor artist who translated egalitarianism into a visual image of individuality and personal dignity. That balance seems to be the thing that draws Tom and Daphne Kaplan, the couple who built the Leiden Collection, to the art they buy and wanted to display in *Rembrandt's Time*.

Lievens was Rembrandt's peer, and they were on the same page. Both men and Dou, Rembrandt's student, worshipped the concept of variousness. Most Dutch Golden Age painters specialized — in flowers, clouds, cows, or portraits, for example, sticking to their lanes. Rembrandt inspired his students to wander and experiment. Lievens was good at everything. Dou stayed in the small format, chiaroscuro-rich, Dutch look, but he painted lots of subjects. His cat painting is most unusual.



Pieter van Laer, *Self-Portrait with Magic Scene*, c. 1635–1637, oil on canvas. (The Leiden Collection, New York)

I'd never heard of Pieter van Laer (1599–c.1642). He wasn't a Rembrandt student, the two didn't know each other or each other's work, and Van Laer worked in Italy, which Rembrandt never visited. His self-portrait (c. 1599) in the show is peripheral, in a way, but it's so fabulous, I'm glad it's there. It's displayed near self-portraits by Lievens, Dou, and Rembrandt, so it works. Van Laer, who was unusually ugly and likely a hunchback, fashions himself as an amateur alchemist, magician, and occultist who has managed to summon the devil. He reacts in horror. A scroll in the foreground reads, "The Devil doesn't jest." It's eerie but also morbidly entertaining. Counter-Reformation rigor aside, Italians were fascinated with magic.



Rembrandt's own student work and his student's mature work. **Left:** Rembrandt van Rijn, *Unconscious Patient (Allegory of Smell)*, c. 1624–1625, oil on panel. **Right:** Carel Fabritius, *Hagar and the Angel*, c. 1645, oil on canvas. (The Leiden Collection, New York)

Since a thread of the exhibition is Rembrandt's students, we had to have some of his own work as a student. There's a lively, engaging wall of Rembrandt juvenilia in the middle of the exhibition. In the mid-1620s, Rembrandt painted five small scenes, the *Five Senses* series. This wasn't an uncommon subject at the time, and it shows Rembrandt's talent even as a teenager for complex compositions and color juxtapositions. They're also little situation comedies, folksy and jokey in a typically Dutch way. *Unconscious Patient (Allegory of Smell)*, from about 1624, shows a just-fainted young man whose nurse is trying to revive him with smelling salts. It seems he'd fainted at the thought of the quack doctor opening his vein and letting the blood drip out into a bowl.

The picture made the art news in 2015 when a small New Jersey auction house sold it. The auction catalogue presented *Allegory of Smell* as the work of an unknown “Continental” artist done in the 19th century, with an estimate of \$750 to \$1,000. High-end dealers don’t haunt only Christie’s and Sotheby’s. They scour provincial auction houses for hidden treasures the auctioneer might overlook but that they are able to spot.

Allegory of Smell smelled like a Rembrandt to a tiny cohort of spotters and dealers. Maybe, maybe not, since attribution is a risky, fraught business, but bidding went through the roof, and the picture sold for \$800,000. The French dealer bought it, cleaned it, and then submitted it to scholars and conservators. A Rembrandt it was, and the Kaplans bought it.

One of the splendors of the show is Fabritius’s *Hagar and the Angel*, from 1645. Fabritius studied with Rembrandt in the mid-1640s and was building a high-flying career when he died in the catastrophic explosion of Delft’s armory, packed with 90,000 pounds of gunpowder. Called the Delft Thunderclap, the accident and fire that followed leveled a third of Delft, killed Fabritius, and destroyed his studio and whatever art he had in it. Only 13 paintings are still with us.

What might have been? *Hagar and the Angel* is big — 63 by 51 inches — and a complex religious and narrative picture. I knew Fabritius’s *Goldfinch*, a small but perfect picture of a goldfinch chained ever so subtly to a perch; his self-portraits, inspired by Rembrandt; and *The Sentry*, as enigmatic as anything Rembrandt did, but had never seen *Hagar and the Angel*. Hagar, who is the prophet Abraham’s mistress, and Ishmael, the son she had with Abraham, have both been exiled into the wilderness at the urging of Sarah, Abraham’s wife. In despair, Hagar prays for mercy. The 13-year-old Ishmael is dying of thirst. She clasps her hands, clutching a long, white handkerchief and hinting that she’s sobbing, so the scene combines supplication and despair. A tiny, single tear falls from one of her eyes. The tear and the handkerchief are nice touches, proto-Victorian and pathetic but sensitive.

She's weathered. After all, mistress to God's right-hand man that she might have been, she's a peasant. The angel appears. "Do not be afraid. . . . Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation," or what has become many Arab nations and today a mixed bag. God delivers a topped-up well from which she fills a water jug, densely painted to suggest heft. Fabritius scratched into the thick paint with the butt of his brush to create rough texture. The angel is androgynous, with a man's face and hands, tall but with a slim waist. The halo, made of concentric bands of colors, is big and surreal. Light, shadow, gesture, and the mist out of which the angel steps convince us that this one has got God's ear.

Hagar and the Angel can go mano a mano with Rembrandt's best work. Obviously, topping Rembrandt's *Night Watch* is impossible, since it's so robust and operatic, but in warmth and pathos, this Fabritius is hard to beat. His palette and light are rooted in Rembrandt's. He would have been in mid-career when Fabritius studied with him, but I can't help thinking that Fabritius was bound for the next level.



Arent de Gelder, *Christ on the Mount of Olives*, c. 1715, oil on panel. (The Leiden Collection, New York)

Arent de Gelder (1645–1727) was Rembrandt's last student, expressive like Rembrandt, a nocturnist, and as gauzy as Rembrandt if not more so by the early 18th century when classicized, crisp line and form were in style. In *Christ on the Mount of Olives*, from 1715, the central figures of Jesus and an angel glow from within. He paints thickly and quickly to make them seem of this world but apparitional, too.

De Gelder draws from Rembrandt, who also did Mount of Olives scenes, but delivers a quieter, less dynamic look. De Gelder has Rembrandt's gravity. Recall that during De Gelder's time, not too far away, in France, Watteau and Rococo style were the hot new things.

If you're doing a Dutch Golden Age show and the one and only lender owns a Vermeer, the last in private hands, why not use it? Vermeer (1632-1675) wasn't a Rembrandt student, they didn't know each other, he was based in Delft, and he probably did only 40 or so pictures to Rembrandt's 300 paintings and hundreds of etchings. Still, it fits. *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal* is from the early 1670s and is the last work Vermeer did that's still with us. It's very beautiful — engaging, personal, and intimate. The simple white background and minimalist palette give it the look of modernity. *Young Woman* is more direct than Vermeer's other work and most of Rembrandt's, and she's sweeter and more innocent. Both artists, though, were masters of the cryptic moment, and both died broke. Frans Hals (1582–1666) is an outlier too, insofar as Rembrandt is concerned, but his small *Portrait of Samuel Ampzing*, from 1630, is robust and hearty, not the art of interiority, and a triumph in black-on-black painting. Both provide good moments in reminding us what Rembrandt is and isn't.



George Wesley Bellows, *Winter Afternoon*, 1909, oil on canvas. (Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach)

I'll close with a few observations about the Norton. I sent a William Wegman retrospective to them years ago when I was a museum director. I could see it was an up-and-coming place, though Florida itself and even Palm Beach were hardly known for art or for intellectual heavy lifting. I'd never been to Florida until I was in my 40s. Before that, Florida meant hayseeds, humidity, and highfalutin martini society. The Norton then had good American Modernism, a surprising, wonderful photography collection, and an attractive building. Its Stuart Davis, Bellows, and Hopper paintings are first-rate. It had ambition, too.

It was bound to thrive. High taxes and a culture of angst in New York and other big cold-belt cities were bound to drive more and more rich people to Florida. These new arrivals, over time, would invest in local museums, with gifts of not only big bucks but also art. The Norton has expanded since the Wegman exhibition, which was about 20 years ago. The expansion is named for the entrepreneur Ken Griffin, a good friend to have. It got — as a gift — a brilliant Sargent portrait in 2022 and bought Alice Neel's 1978 portrait of Virginia Miller after a broad-based fundraising drive in 2023. Nothing succeeds like success — and drive, good leadership, and a positive attitude, of course.



Exterior view of the Norton Museum of Art. (© CJ Walker, courtesy of the Norton Museum of Art)

The Leiden Collection had never toured an American museum, but the Norton networked, pitched, and got the Kaplans' attention. It's a huge coup. The museum has a strong exhibition track record: *Sorolla and the Sea* in 2024–2025 and the 2023 Joseph Stella nature show as well as exhibitions of private collections that, I hope, come to the Norton eventually. I spent lots of time at the Norton since I led three National Review Institute groups through the place earlier this month on the day of the Buckley Prize gala. The staff could not have been more accommodating, and everyone seemed to be smiling! Northeast museums can be a land of scowls.

My sole quibble with this wonderful museum is the prominence and priorities of its DEI plan. I abhor the DEI movement, which, functionally, pits people against one another and evolves into quotas and two-tier HR practices driven by race and gender. I have no problem with raising salaries for workers on the low end and focusing on salary adjustments for women, who in many museums were once paid less than men for the same work, but this is changing, and fast. In the vast majority of museums, these changes were probably made years ago. DEI sensitivity training, we know, doesn't accomplish anything positive and enriches a racket of consultants. A good director and curators, as the Norton has, ought to be naturally interested in balance, but DEI is an ideology that foregrounds a category such as race at the expense of art, which becomes a prop. It would be best to ditch DEI lingo from the Norton's — and every museum's — website.

Congratulations to the Norton for a brilliant presentation and to the Kaplans for their exquisite taste and impressive detective skills — they smoked out treasures — as well as their supreme judgment in sending *Rembrandt's Time* to Florida.