The New Criterion

Features December 2025

Leiden lights

by Karen Wilkin

On "Art and Life in Rembrandt's Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection," at the Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, Florida.

As he tells the story, the Franco-American businessman, philanthropist, wildlife conservationist, and art collector Thomas S. Kaplan had fallen "irredeemably" in love with Rembrandt van Rijn by the age of six, encouraged by visits to the Metropolitan Museum of Art with his mother. The adult Kaplan continued to spend considerable time in museums, studying Rembrandt's paintings and honing his knowledge of the painter's era. When he discovered, to his surprise, that works from the Golden Age of Netherlandish art were actually available for purchase, a new passion was born. In 2003, Kaplan and his wife Daphne Recanati Kaplan began to collect seventeenth-century Dutch paintings and drawings, with the advice of Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., then curator of Northern Baroque art at the National Gallery, Washington, D.C. The result: the Leiden Collection, now more than 220 paintings and drawings (and still growing) that include an astonishing seventeen Rembrandts, exemplary works by his pupils and colleagues, and the only Johannes Vermeer in private hands. When others in Kaplan's tax bracket were competing for sharks in formaldehyde and facsimiles of balloon dogs, he was beginning to acquire such works as a vigorous Rembrandt drawing of a young lion resting—nicely conflating his lifelong dedication to wildlife, especially big cats, with his love of seventeenth-century Dutch art—and a very small, elegant portrait by Gerrit Dou, Rembrandt's first pupil.

Unlike those of his peers who have created eponymous museums, Kaplan sees the Leiden Collection as an educational resource to be shared, not a means of personal aggrandizement. For the first fifteen years of his life as a collector, works from what he terms his "lending library of Old Masters" were made available to exhibitions anonymously. Since "coming out" in 2017 with an exhibition at the Louvre, the collection has sent highlights to China, Russia, and Abu Dhabi, while earlier this year, a selection of seventy-five works was shown in Amsterdam as part of the celebrations of the 750th anniversary of the city's founding. Now, that exhibition plus one rare addition is on view as "Art and Life in Rembrandt's Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection" at the Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach.[1] (Kaplan credits his enthusiasm for wildlife and support for conservation to his early years spent in Florida, hence his desire to have the exhibition seen at the Norton.) Arranged thematically, the selection explores portraiture and self-portraiture, scenes of everyday life, the occasional religious or mythological theme, and at least one surprising oddity. The thread connecting many of the works explains the collection's name: Leiden was Rembrandt's birthplace and the site of his first studio. And while Rembrandt is the core of the collection, many of the other artists represented have direct connections to him and often to the city he was born in. The subtext of the exhibition could be described as a history of relationships among seventeenth-century Dutch painters.

The installation at the Norton begins with Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait with Shaded Eyes* (1634), painted in Leiden when the artist, born in 1606, was twenty-eight and already becoming known. He meets our gaze from under a rakishly tilted black beret, which, together with his fur-trimmed coat, probably a costume, suggests that the painting can also be considered a *tronie* or character study—a type much appreciated at the time. However we categorize the work, the subtle play of light on the face, the delicate rendering of fur, pleated linen, flesh, and hair, and above all the forthright gaze remind us why the young painter attracted students even at the beginning of his own career; Dou, also a native of Leiden, was apprenticed to Rembrandt at the age of fourteen, in 1628. Our sense of Rembrandt's early workshop is enlarged by a small painting from another of his first pupils, Isaac de Jouderville, a version of the only known full-length self-portrait of Rembrandt, shown in "oriental dress," *circa* 1631. Since de Jouderville's painting does not reproduce exactly his teacher's, it suggests that Rembrandt's teaching method involved having his pupils study and attempt to emulate his style, rather than copy works. Two later self-portraits by former students from the Amsterdam workshop, Govert Flinck and Ferdinand Bol, echo poses from their teacher's self-portraits that he, in turn, had adapted from Titian, as well as costumes that recall both Rembrandt's prototypes—that puffy beret—and the Renaissance. Later in the installation, dramatic works by Arent de Gelder, Rembrandt's last pupil, from his Amsterdam studio, complete the story.

Rembrandt van Rijn, Self-Portrait with Shaded Eyes*, 1634, Oil on canvas. On view at the Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, Florida.*

Confronting us at the beginning, Rembrandt's magisterial *Minerva in Her Study* (1635) announces the artist's bid at history painting—themes from classical antiquity, mythology, or the Bible, enacted by large-scale figures, considered the most elevated form of art. (Portrait painting, which Rembrandt became known for, ranked second because the subjects could be distinguished or important people; in the seventeenth-century Netherlands, however, the sitters were more likely to be affluent burghers and their wives.) Minerva, the goddess of wisdom and war, is here a robust, majestic Dutch woman, possibly modeled by Rembrandt's wife Saskia van Uylenburgh, whom he had married two years earlier. Minerva, in a richly embroidered cloak, crowned with laurel, looks up from a massive book. She ignores the arms and armor casually placed behind her as she devotes herself to scholarship. We learn that there may have been a political aspect to the painting, since, at the time it was made, Amsterdam's regents strongly opposed the Dutch Republic's joining France in an invasion of the Southern Netherlands, which were then held by Spain. Since Rembrandt had moved to Amsterdam from Leiden only a few years before painting *Minerva*, it is conceivable that the image of a peace-loving goddess who rejects war for intellectual pursuits was designed to appeal to the regents.

An additional early high point, competing with *Minerva*, is a self-portrait by another major presence in the collection, Rembrandt's near coeval and fellow Leiden native Jan Lievens, painted *circa* 1629–30 when its author was twenty-two or twenty-three. With his mane of silky hair, sidelong glance, and sensitively rendered features, Lievens seems to transcend the centuries, pointing ahead to nineteenth-century Romanticism. Lievens and Rembrandt have been described as friendly rivals, both immensely gifted, both having studied with the history painter Pieter Lastman in Amsterdam at different times. They must have frequented each other's studios and certainly posed for one another. The collection's rowdy *Card Players* (*ca*. 1625), by Lievens, includes Rembrandt as a central figure, while Lievens peers over the shoulders of the singers in

Rembrandt's *Three Musicians (Allegory of Hearing)* (*ca*. 1624–25). Lievens, a year younger, was a somewhat more sophisticated artist in these early years, since he seems to have been aware of the dramatic use of light and dark by the Utrecht painters who were influenced by Caravaggio; the low-life subject matter of *Card Players* is another link to the Utrecht Caravaggisti. But the youthful Rembrandt and Lievens were equally esteemed and highly regarded. When Constantijn Huygens, the poet, connoisseur, and secretary to the stadtholder, visited Leiden, he found much to admire in both artists' efforts. He commissioned work from the two painters not long after his visit and was helpful in advancing their careers.

The friendly rivals parted company when Rembrandt moved to Amsterdam in 1631. Lievens went to London the following year. Before leaving, he made another of the collection's stellar works, installed later in the show: *Boy in a Cape and Turban (Portrait of Prince Rupert of the Palatinate)*, painted around 1631, when the sitter was about eleven years old, a commission presumably obtained through Huygens. The portrait is a miracle of luminous oranges and creamy yellows composed of interlocking ovals, with the boy's pale, rosy-cheeked face framed by a blue-gray turban that matches his eyes, crowned with a bird-of-paradise feather. The nuanced lighting, the delicate rendering of small details, and the sense that the sitter is occupied by something just over the viewer's shoulder keep us engaged, contradicting the apparent economy of the image. Another striking Lievens portrait, *Bookkeeper at His Desk* (*ca*. 1627), is a powerful complement to the appealing image of the preadolescent prince. In the pale, silvery painting of an introspective old man with a white beard, half in shadow, angled toward the light, the illumination itself seems to be the main subject, dominating just as the golden glow of the portrait of Prince Rupert does.

Jan Lievens, Boy in a Cape and Turban, ca. *1631, Oil on canvas. On view at the Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, Florida.*

Moving through the exhibition, we discover sections devoted to genre scenes, images of everyday life, often presented in meticulous detail by the Leiden *fijnschilders*—"fine painters"—a group including Rembrandt's pupil Dou, who remained in the city; *his* pupil Frans van Mieris; and occasionally Gabriel Metsu. (See what I mean about the history of relationships?) Dou's *Herring Seller and Boy* (*ca*. 1664), an elegant checklist of carrots, a cabbage, a string of garlic, and other kitchen accoutrements as well as the fish being haggled over, is typical. (The title notwithstanding, it's the boy who seems to be selling the herring to the unimpressed woman.) Typical, too, is Van Mieris's *Elderly Couple in an Interior* (*ca*. 1650–55), with its deep, shadowy space and a woman plucking a duck in the foreground, while her bearded male companion, lighting his pipe with a glowing ember, turns to look at us. Dou's loosely brushed, suggestively lit *Old Woman at a Window with a Candle* (1671) moves into very different territory, an alternative to the near-obsessive detail of the *fijnschilders*. The most dramatic inclusion is an unusually large early Metsu, *Woman Selling Game from a Stall* (*ca*. 1653–54), a tribute to carnivorousness. The protagonist, notable for an impressive pair of barely veiled breasts deliberately framed by her dress, holds up a very dead hare by a hind leg. Elsewhere a goose, a chicken, and several other equally dead birds form a loose triangle with the rabbit, echoing the principles of classicizing composition more usually reserved for history painting. The renderings of luxuriant fur, feathers of different kinds, and basketry, not to mention the tightly stretched sheer linen on the game seller's corsage, are alluring enough to make up for the carnage. What may be the finest of the collection's *fijnschilder* works, Van Mieris's *Young Woman Feeding a Parrot* (1663), comes later in the show. This tour de force of exquisitely rendered textures was so popular that numerous copies exist. The protagonist, wearing a splendid velvet jacket edged with fur and a satin skirt, pauses at her sewing to tend to her luxury pet, perched before her. The actors in this seemingly anecdotal scene, we are told, embody industriousness, virtue, eloquence, and eagerness to learn.

There are rewarding groupings throughout, including a section devoted to how affluent Hollanders wanted to be portrayed in different periods. A rather severe couple, painted by Gerard ter Borch the Younger *circa* 1660, each in unornamented, sober black, are crisply etched against dark grounds. Only the gorgeously detailed translucent lace of the woman's spreading collar and cuffs and her male counterpart's linen collar alleviate the sense of stiffness and austerity. Nearby, the shimmering white-satin dress and modish French-inspired hairstyle in a small but sumptuous portrait of Huygens's youngest daughter, Susanna, painted in 1669 by Caspar Netscher, anticipates John Singer Sargent's ability to overwhelm his subjects with ravishing fabric, at the same time that it points to what we are told were the "increasingly cosmopolitan aspirations of the wealthy Dutch patriciate." The column and drape of the background, along with the distant landscape, also speak to traditions of aristocratic portraiture very different from the bare necessity of the Ter Borch paintings. A lively, very fashionably dressed young couple, painted by Van Mieris in 1669, seems to have aspired even more to the kind of elegant representation, with balustrade and landscape as background, that Van Dyck had made requisite for British royals and aristocrats a generation earlier. Clearly, something about Dutch society changed during the 1660s.

Johannes Vermeer, Young Woman Seated at a Virginal, ca. *1670–75, Oil on canvas. On view at the Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, Florida.*

It's an understatement to say that there are remarkable works throughout "Art and Life in Rembrandt's Time." Even though we have been primed by encountering the dazzling Rembrandt and Lievens self-portraits and *Minerva in Her Study* near the entrance, we keep discovering works that we can't quite believe are in private hands, including a major painting seen only at the Norton: the monumental, emotionally charged *Hagar and the Angel* (*ca*. 1645), one of only five surviving history paintings by Rembrandt's short-lived, brilliantly gifted pupil Carel Fabritius, who lost his life in the Delft gunpowder explosion of 1654. And there's Rembrandt's early and impossibly fragile *Young Girl in a Gold-Trimmed Cloak* (*ca*. 1632), with her halo of fine golden curls and introspective expression, a *tronie* so personable that it is difficult to remember that it wasn't a commissioned portrait. At the opposite end of the spectrum, painted in 1660 towards the end of the artist's life, is a vigorously brushed, impastoed portrait of a seated elderly woman with clasped hands, a shaft of light illuminating her strong features. Vermeer's pared-to-essentials *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal* (*ca*. 1670–75) commands our attention with its cool orchestration of cream, dull yellow, and pale gray, and retains it with the tender gaze of the musician as she turns toward us; the red ribbons holding her curls are a delightful punctuation, a fragile scribble contradicting the severe geometry of the instrument and chair back, bracketing the sweep of the young woman's richly gathered shawl.

The oddity? Metsu's weird nude self-portrait *Hunter Getting Dressed after Bathing* (*ca*. 1654–56), with the subject, flanked by his dog and gun, seated in a landscape with a stream and a windmill. A dead hare hangs nearby, a figure in a broad-brimmed hat peers from a bridge, and another very small bearded nude—the subject shown while bathing?—is still in the water. There's also a nice surprise: a sensitive head of a young boy by the too-little-known Brussels-born Michael Sweerts, with dissolving shadows that speak to his sojourn in Italy early in his career. And a tiny, urgently brushed Rembrandt head of an old man. And. And. And.

The exhibition is accompanied by a handsome, fully illustrated catalogue, jointly produced for both the Amsterdam and Norton showings, with interesting essays by Kaplan, Wheelock, and numerous Dutch scholars of the period, including a revelatory piece about a metal headpiece that women wore under their caps, which sometimes held large, heavy "earrings." Each exhibited work has an informative entry. It's rather hard to navigate the book, since there's no index and paintings are grouped thematically, but there's a terrific website, theleidencollection.com, with scholarly essays illuminating over 150 works. For the real thing, though, everyone heading to Florida between now and March 2026 should include the Norton on the itinerary.

1. "Art and Life in Rembrandt's Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection" opened at the Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, Florida, on October 25, 2025, and remains on view through March 29, 2026. ↩