

Masters Unveiled

The Leiden Collection brings 17th-century Dutch paintings to the Norton

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Johannes Vermeer's Young Woman Seated at a Virginal. -Courtesy The Leiden Collection.

A cathedral of wrinkles and veins, memories and gray hairs, awakens to a glorious light shining from the left. There's the withered face framed by a dark headdress and the sagging skin, which time has betrayed. The spotlight does not shake the sitter's stoical expression. Oracle-like, she is quiet and trying to remain unnoticed.

That is impossible if you are Rembrandt van Rijn's mother and the subject of this touching portrait attributed to his studio. At the time it was painted, around 1628, the Dutch artist was in his early 20s and already the king of nuanced chiaroscuro, a twist on that dramatic contrast that made Caravaggio famous. Though echoing the Italian master, Rembrandt's variety is softer, less theatrical, and does not succumb to the former's propensity for bluntness. Rather than assaulting the sitters, his lights and shadows court them. His approach to chiaroscuro is authentic and cerebral.

The tender quality of this tronie (a character study of an unspecified individual) embodies the way the Dutch cared for the elderly: with dignity and respect. The study of aging and decay fascinated Rembrandt and his peers; capturing these physical effects was an achievement and a privilege. In this case, the old woman's lips and right eye are the recipients of a subtle red tint, while the delicate embellishments on her robe and embroidered white collar derive from scratches into wet paint. In the same manner she first became a mother – presumably with urgency and great care– the artist has delivered her.

“Rembrandt’s Mother” is among more than 70 masterpieces on view through March 29 at Norton Museum of Art. Billed as the largest exhibition of privately held Dutch 17th-century paintings ever organized in the United States, “Art and Life in Rembrandt’s Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection” features 27 of the finest artists from this period, including some intimately connected to Rembrandt. The holistic approach is a key departure from blockbuster exhibitions, which often seclude a famous artist and present him/her in isolation.

The Norton Museum joins the ranks of iconic museums such as the Louvre, the Pushkin, and the Hermitage that have hosted what’s considered one of the world’s most important private collections of works from the Dutch Golden Age. The Florida stop presents a rare opportunity to experience dozens of masterpieces firsthand, without the need for a transatlantic flight. The works are arranged thematically and feature market scenes, domestic settings, ordinary life, biblical passages, formal portraits, and historical subjects. Most are generous in scale and lean toward oversharing.

A short elevator ride to the third floor stands between visitors and lively works such as “Hagar and the Angel,” the only privately held painting remaining of Carel Fabritius, Rembrandt’s student. It depicts the divine intervention that saved Hagar and her son Ishmael from dying of thirst after several days in the wilderness. Handkerchief in hand, the defeated woman surrenders to the mercy of a towering angel, before whom she kneels to pray. Only a miracle can save them.



Rembrandt van Rijn's Young Girl in a Gold-Trimmed Cloak. -Courtesy The Leiden Collection.

Enter Fabritius' angel, which is nothing short of extraordinary. Rendered in translucent tones and beams of light, the heavenly figure exhibits holy and human qualities simultaneously. Sturdy and ethereal, he provides spiritual counsel as well as a practical solution to Hagar's despair. The angel's mere touch has magically infused her shall with lighter colors resembling his own robe. It's as if he were transferring his power to her. Expressive Old Testament passages like this one were a recurrent motif of Rembrandt and his circle.

Another captivating piece is "Young Woman Seated at a Virginal," the only work by Johannes Vermeer in private hands and one to have endured much controversy around its attribution. Few paintings in this show connect with the viewer as this one does. That's partially attributed to its small scale, which fuels a certain intimacy, and the fact the protagonist is looking directly at the viewer while playing the instrument.

We can thank restoration efforts from 2024 for reviving her subtle smile, ribbons, curls, and other previously obscured details, including the blue velvet fabric covering her chair and the folds in her satin skirt. Vermeer's lack of context and demure surroundings is intentional. By isolating and framing the young woman against an anemic background, he has placed all the burden of the scene on her but also elevated her status. Her unguarded friendly demeanor is an invitation to step into the room with her and listen to the melody; close your eyes if it helps.

Scattered throughout the eggplant-colored galleries are 17 of Rembrandt's paintings which underscore his pursue of the unseen, his baiting that which lies beneath the surface. In the French bestseller "Mona's Eyes," the grandfather character explains it to his little granddaughter this way: "his technique is like a slow revealing of the subject, as if it were emerging from the shadows."

That is precisely how the baby-faced blond woman in "Young Girl in a Gold-Trimmed Cloak" enters the stage. Gradually, assisted by a light source from the upper left, Rembrandt conjures her without sparing any details or flaws. As if to shatter this caricature of grace, Rembrandt has also given her hints of a double chin and an exaggerated forehead. A seemingly rigid gaze turns enigmatic when we notice her eyes, initially thought to be fixed on the viewer, are faraway. She exhibits the compliance of a caged bird, but her thoughts and spirit are borderless.

This striking oval painting, made by the Dutch master in 1632 after he moved to Amsterdam, demonstrates his distinctive workflow. He would often begin his paintings with a brown wash that set the tone and mood. While applying it, he would map out the areas of light and shadow. Over that brown foundation, or imprimatura, he would then add layers of colors in transparent and opaque paints. Each brushstroke would rescue the image in his mind from the abyss, essentially working in reverse from back to front. In "Young Girl in a Gold-Trimmed Cloak," even the ochre background succumbs to tonal changes. Its notorious theft from Boston's Museum of Fine Arts in 1975 boosted its profile but it wasn't until 1986, when it sold for \$10.5 million (a record for a work by the Dutch artist), that it made heads spin.

Named after Rembrandt's birthplace, the university town of Leiden, and built over the past two decades by Thomas S. Kaplan and his wife, Daphne Recanati Kaplan, the Leiden Collection consists of more than 220 paintings and drawings. Among those lent to the Norton is Rembrandt's smallest known work, "Bust of a Bearded Old Man," which packs a punch in its 4"x3" frame (1633), and three amusing works from the "Five Senses" series that provide comedic relief. Be on the lookout for them. The first actual piece the Kaplans offered on loan is one of the most beautiful on display here.

"It's exceptionally evocative in that the look of the boy, who is clearly aristocratic if not royal, is both a mixture of dignity, responsibility and, to a certain extent, anxiety about the future," Mr. Kaplan explains in a 2018 video about lending his collection to museums.



"Art and Life in Rembrandt's Time" is already generating much buzz and drawing large crowds. -GRETTEL SARMIENTO / COURTESY PHOTOS



Rembrandt van Rijn's Portrait of a Man in a Red Coat. -Courtesy The Leiden Collection

He is referring to Jan Lievens' "Boy in a Cape and Turban (Portrait of Prince Rupert of the Palatinate," which depicts a radiant young boy wearing an impeccable Oriental costume rendered in yellows, golds, and blues. This image owes its magnetism in part to the flashy fabrics shaping his exotic garment, but above all to the boy's mature expression. The firmness of the long feather crowing his turban mimics his unwavering determination.

Toxic idealism met its match in artists like Lievens, who fueled an appetite for authentic portrayals of the human experience. This shift from the manicured and platonic toward raw emotions had a lasting impression. It inspired the likes of Lucian Freud, Vincent van Gogh, and Francisco Goya and influenced subsequent movements such as Impressionism and Expressionism. When modern photography produces dramatic portraits by lighting one side of the face more than the other, it uses a technique called Rembrandt lighting.

Rare are the shows of this magnitude that don't have viewers tiring out and craving for the exit sign. "Art and Life in Rembrandt's Time" has them revisiting galleries chasing, perhaps, a dab of white on the tip of a nose or another overlooked detail. If I had to guess, it's that chilling intangible mystery separating Dutch paintings from other masterpieces of a warmer, more extrovert vein (think Renaissance) that have them retracing steps.

In The Know

What: "Art and Life in Rembrandt's Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection"

When: Through March 29, 2026

Where: Norton Museum of Art, 1450 S. Dixie Highway, West Palm Beach

Information: 561-832-5196 or norton.org.



"Art and Life in Rembrandt's Time runs through March 29. -GRETEL SARMIENTO / COURTESY PHOTOS



Visitors marvel at "Allegory of Faith" by Hendrick Ter Brugghen, one of more than 70 Dutch masterpieces on view through March 29. -GRETEL SARMIENTO / COURTESY PHOTOS