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‘Art and Life in Rembrandt’s Time: Masterpieces From the Leiden Collection’ Review: Dazzling Dutch Paintings

Drawn from an astonishing private collection, an exhibition at Florida’s Norton Museum of Art features works by Rembrandt, Vermeer and other figures of the Dutch Golden Age.



Rembrandt's 'Young Girl in a Gold-Trimmed Cloak' (c. 1632).

By Eric Gibson

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To the usual list of reasons for heading to Florida at this time of year, winter-weary northerners can add another: the opportunity to see a wealth of Rembrandts and other jewels of Dutch Golden Age painting. The occasion is “Art and Life in Rembrandt’s Time: Masterpieces From the Leiden Collection” at the Norton Museum of Art, through March 29. It’s an unparalleled opportunity to do a deep dive into one of the most dazzling epochs in the history of art and, at just over 70 paintings, one that is perfectly scaled.

The Leiden Collection, named after Rembrandt’s native city, was formed by Thomas S. Kaplan and his wife, Daphne Recanati Kaplan. Its 200-plus 17th-century Dutch paintings and drawings include 19 Rembrandts and a Vermeer that is the only work of the artist’s maturity in private hands. (Since the collection’s focus is the human comedy, there are no examples of the other great subjects of the period, landscape and still-life.) It’s the kind of effort you’d think only a public institution with exceptionally deep pockets could pull off, and is the more impressive considering that the Kaplans began acquiring only in 2003.

The Leiden's Elizabeth Nogrady and the Norton's Robert Evren and J. Rachel Gustafson have grouped the works thematically—"Fashioning Identities," "From Market to Kitchen," "Intellectual Life," etc.—to present a picture of Dutch life and culture at a pivotal moment, when economic expansion created an environment in which innovation, artistic and otherwise, could flourish. Besides Rembrandt, the 27 artists include Vermeer and Frans Hals; Jan Lievens, Rembrandt's contemporary and friend; Gerard Dou, one of his students; as well as Gabriel Metsu and Jan Steen.

With 17 paintings, the great presence here is Rembrandt, and we are given something of a mini-retrospective. The earliest are three allegorical scenes about the senses from c. 1624-25, when he was just shy of 20. Without the label you'd be hard put to know he'd painted them. They're small, the colors are garish, and they're coarser in feeling than the work for which he is best known. The rest are portraits from his maturity. They include the monumental and magisterial "Minerva in Her Study" (1635), "Young Girl in a Gold-Trimmed Cloak" (c. 1632)—surely one of his greatest—and "Portrait of a Seated Woman With Her Hands Clasped" (1660), an example of his emerging late style in its more heavily impastoed paint handling and mood of introspection.

Highlights From the Leiden Collection



Vermeer's 'Young Woman Seated at a Virginal' (c. 1670-75). THE LEIDEN COLLECTION



Caspar Netscher's 'Portrait of Susanna Doublet Huygens' (1669). THE LEIDEN COLLECTION



Gerard Dou's 'Cat Crouching on the Ledge of an Artist's Atelier' (1657). THE LEIDEN COLLECTION



Gerard Dou's 'Herring Seller and Boy' (c. 1664). THE LEIDEN COLLECTION



Rembrandt's 'Minerva in Her Study' (1635). THE LEIDEN COLLECTION



Rembrandt's 'Portrait of a Seated Woman With Her Hands Clapsed' (1660). THE LEIDEN COLLECTION

Two features define Rembrandt as a portraitist and serve as the measure of his greatness. The first is that, more than any other artist, rendering a likeness wasn't the end but the beginning. He aimed to capture the temperament and character of his sitters as revealed by their physiognomy. Thus "Young Girl in a Gold-Trimmed Cloak" comes across as, well, a bit of a piece of work. Her left eye stares out at us unflinchingly, even confrontationally, while her right eye sizes us up. The mouth renders the verdict: a barely perceptible sneer.

The second feature is what T.S. Eliot, writing about the creative process, referred to as "a continual extinction of personality." Some artists draw attention to themselves in their choice of subjects, their handling of materials or other ways. Outside of his self-portraits, Rembrandt never does. In "Young Girl" his supreme mastery may be on display in his rendering of her soft, smooth cheeks, her fluffy hair and the almost tactile gold trim. But aside from the artist's signature, the painting's focus remains squarely on the model. So self-effacing is Rembrandt, in fact, that some portraits, and this is one, seem to have come into being independent of human agency. The artist's modesty is evident even in the heavily worked late paintings like "Seated Woman." In a modern artist, such paint handling would be self-referential. Here it is purely descriptive.

Rembrandt is such a towering figure that it's almost cruel to put anyone else in the same room. Not everybody gets overshadowed, though. Vermeer's "Young Woman Seated at a Virginal" (c. 1670-75) quickly draws us into its strangely silent world. Lievens's bust-length "Self-Portrait" (c. 1629-30) is almost photographic in its immediacy, the impression it conveys of a figure caught on the fly, so different from Rembrandt's figures. And a more appropriate title for Caspar Netscher's "Portrait of Susanna Doublet Huygens" (1669) would have been "The White Satin Gown." Poor Susanna: We only have eyes for her outfit. Netscher has meticulously rendered the garment's luscious materiality—its fall, folds, creases and bunchings—yet transcended mere description to give us a shimmering vision of white and gray highlighted by splashes of red.

Then there is Dou. He's the un-Rembrandt, a poet of intimate domesticity whose nine paintings here are less than 2 feet per side. Despite that, he almost runs away with the show. "Cat Crouching on the Ledge of an Artist's Atelier" (1657) is a vivid rendering of a furry feline, its attention caught by something outside the frame. "Herring Seller and Boy" (c. 1664) is a shop scene with a still life in the form of an array of produce that manages to elevate the humble cabbage to a starring role. If you ever needed an excuse to start spring break early, "Art and Life in Rembrandt's Time" is it.

Art and Life in Rembrandt's Time: Masterpieces From the Leiden Collection

Norton Museum of Art, through March 29

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