

Dutch Masters and Modern Muses: A Golden Night at the Norton Museum of Art Gala

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The Norton Garden tent was transformed into a living Dutch Old Master floral painting for the Norton Museum of Art Gala, where nearly 700 guests dined amidst a chiaroscuro of candlelight, overflowing fruit, and Delft china to celebrate the museum's landmark Rembrandt exhibition.

PALM BEACH • BY: LEE FRYD

The Norton just keeps upping its game. This season, there are Rembrandts on its walls. As if there wasn't enough bringing the world to its shores. "Art and Life in Rembrandt's Time," from The Leiden Collection, is the largest exhibit of privately held Dutch 17th-century paintings ever shown in the United States. More than 75 works, it includes 17 by **Rembrandt van Rijn**, alongside paintings by such intimately connected contemporaries as his teacher, **Pieter Lastman**, and pupils **Ferdinand Bol** and **Arent de Gelder**.

It's a glimpse into 17th-century life in the Netherlands — and the inspiration for a stunning gala. Gala Co-Chairs **Audrey Gruss**, **Sue Hostetler**, and **Josephine Kalisman** worked with designer **Chris Hessney** of Hessney & Co. to recreate the mood of a 17th-century Dutch still life. Long candlelit tables overflowed with fruit and flowers. Light on linen. Rembrandt's chiaroscuro dance of shade and shimmer, intimacy and mystery brought to life.



Ghislain d'Humieres, Kelly Williams, Josephine Kalisman, Audrey Gruss, and Sue Hostetler.

“We wanted it to feel as though we were walking into a Dutch Old Master floral painting,” **Audrey Gruss** told me, “natural candlelight, chandeliers, flowers, exotic fruit, Delft china. The Dutch loved shells, tulips, and all kinds of luxury items, so we added that. Chris Hessney completely understood the direction that we wanted and did a fantastic job of delivering.” People couldn’t stop talking about it. “We have never received so many compliments!

“Last year, we had a very contemporary look of black and white, projecting high-tech films of paintings in the museum. This year, we were so happy we could maintain that high level of design, in complete contrast, with a traditional theme.”



A masterclass in chiaroscuro: long candlelit tables dressed in fine linens were laden with Delft china and artful arrangements of fruit and flowers to mirror the Golden Age masterpieces on the gallery walls.



Every detail was a nod to the Golden Age: Lush, garden-style florals including tulips and ranunculus were paired with navy linens and intricate Delft china to evoke the bountiful spirit of 17th-century Dutch life.



Even the dessert display mirrored the richness of a 17th-century still life, overflowing with seasonal fruits, flowers, and artisanal sweets.

Credit for the evening also goes to Vice Chairs **Candace Barasch, Lorna James, Beth Rudin DeWoody, Lisa Tananbaum, and Silvia Zoullas**. And as always, to **Kelly Williams**, Chair of the Norton's Board of Trustees, and **Ghislain d'Humières**, Kenneth C. Griffin Director and CEO.

The evening honored philanthropist/museum trustee **Ronnie Heyman** and artist **Loie Hollowell**.

Oliver Barker, Chairman, Sotheby's Europe, presided over an auction that included Hollowell's *Blue Brain on Flesh Shoulders* (inspired by her father, the artist **David Hollowell**, whose paintings were also on display) and works by **Julie Curtiss, Jeffrey Gibson, Jessie Henson, and Marilyn Minter**.



A look at the evening's featured auction works, anchored by Loie Hollowell's *Blue Brain on Flesh Shoulders*.



Loie Hollowell (*left*) and Martin and Audrey Gruss provide a modern counterpoint to the Dutch Golden Age. Audrey's vibrant gown and Loie's auction centerpiece, *Blue Brain on Flesh Shoulders*, brought a contemporary "dance of shade and shimmer" to the Norton Garden tent.



Kenneth C. Griffin Director and CEO Ghislain d'Humières with gala honoree Ronnie Heyman and Board of Trustees Chair Kelly Williams. Heyman, a longtime museum trustee and philanthropist, was celebrated alongside Loie Hollowell for her transformative impact on the Norton.

Almost 700 luminaries from the art, philanthropy, and business communities swanned through the night. Including art historian and collector **Michel Witmer**, who falls into all three categories.

Having spent time in a grand family apartment overlooking the Louvre, Witmer was raised by parents who were avid collectors. He began buying art at 11. He is most proud of his professional credentials — especially as a lecturer at France’s national musée. He’s also on the advisory board of TEFAF (after many years on its board) and Chairman for the Fine Arts Committee at The Society for the Four Arts.



Oliver Barker leads the Norton auction.

“The Dutch artists of the 17th century, their Golden Age, remain important for artists and art historians to see and study,” he told me. “These are genuine masterpieces. **Tom Kaplan** (who assembled and owns the collection) concentrated on Dutch painting in particular from the school of Leiden, a number of small-format paintings with a lot of detail. And, they make you smile.

“For example, there’s a Rembrandt called the *Allegory of Smell*. One of the figures is passed out. The other characters are turning up their noses and trying to give him something to smell. The rest of Europe were doing very serious pious Catholic paintings,” **Witmer** told me. “These paintings were done for enjoyment. And the Dutch traditionally had a sense of humor.”

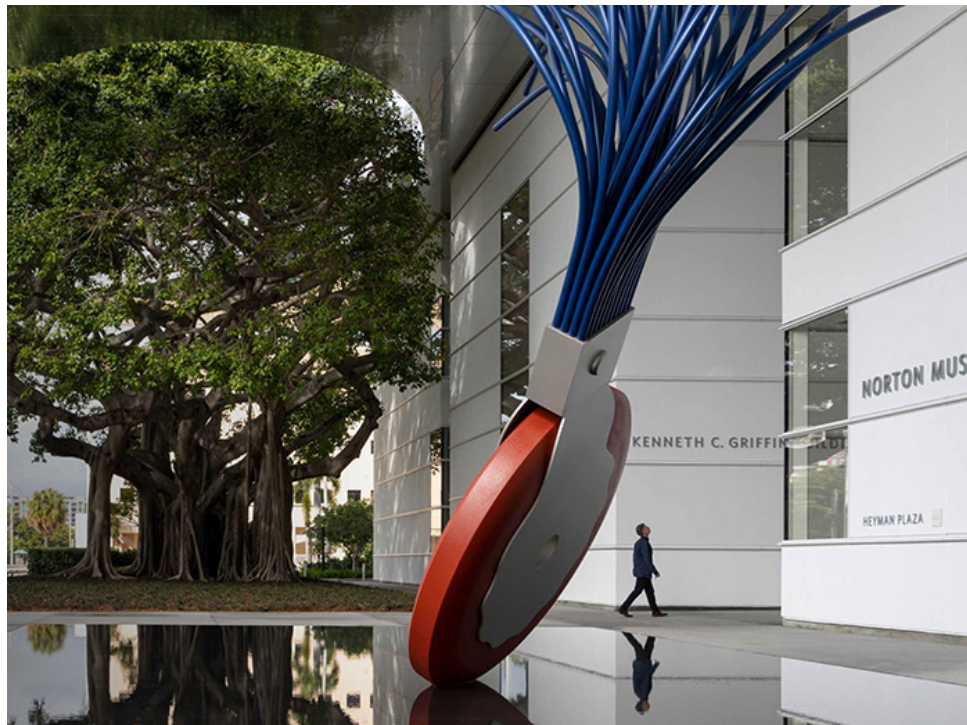


Rembrandt’s *Allegory of Smell*. It is presumed that the young man fainted in fear of bloodletting; the woman’s overly dramatic concern, the doctor’s dubious skills as a barber-surgeon, and the young man’s collapse at the mere thought of the impending operation tell a humorous tale.

“South Florida has great art collections. But, it’s not rich with Dutch Old Masters. This show fills that gap. Until now, if you wanted to see paintings like these, you would have to travel to the National Gallery, the Metropolitan, or the Philadelphia Museums of Art.

“Now these great Dutch treasures have come to us. We had the Degas drawing show and now the art nouveau show at the Four Arts. The Norton was able to get a great master like **Norman Foster** to redesign and expand it. So, South Florida has certainly become an art destination point.”

In 2013, the Norton worked with London-based architectural firm **Foster + Partners** to create a transformative Masterplan for the Museum’s campus, including new public and garden spaces, the Heyman Plaza, a new entry featuring **Claes Oldenburg** and **Coosje van Bruggen’s** iconic *Typewriter Eraser, Scale X*, 1999; the welcoming Great Hall; 12,000 square feet of new gallery space; and the restoration of six Museum-owned 1920s-era historic homes that house artists-in-residence. This elevated the Norton into an internationally significant architectural structure and paved the way for these types of equally significant exhibitions.



The result of a transformative masterplan by Foster + Partners, the Norton’s entrance features Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen’s iconic *Typewriter Eraser, Scale X*, 1999.

The Norton remains committed to serving all of Palm Beach. This night raised close to \$5 million to support the Norton's Curatorial, Learning, and Community Engagement programs.

Corporate Sponsors included Morgan Stanley Private Wealth Management and Pace Gallery at the Gold level, and Acquavella Galleries, Bank of America Private Bank, Chanel, Community Foundation for Palm Beach and Martin Counties, GL Homes, and Sotheby's, at the Silver level (whose generosity made the 2026 Gala Auction possible). Additional support was provided by Gander & White.

And so, just as the portraits and character studies in the museum portrayed the social aspirations, individuality, spiritual, and intellectual pursuits of its era, a walk through the Norton Museum Gala cocktail hour could reveal a similar cross section of ours.