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Rembrandt's DNA

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The Leiden Collection—one of the largest private collections of Dutch art in the world—was conceived as a "lending library for Old Masters," animated by the humanist spirit found in Rembrandt's paintings.

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Carel Fabritius: *Hagar and the Angel*, circa 1645

“The art of Rembrandt and of the Dutch is, quite simply, ART FOR MAN.” With this ringing endorsement, the French journalist and critic Théophile Thoré closed volume one of his *Musées de la Hollande* (1858–1860). Having been exiled for his political activity a decade earlier, Thoré was writing under the pseudonym W. Burger, and what this self-proclaimed “citizen” or *Bürger* primarily meant by an “art for man” was an art produced for ordinary people rather than the popes and kings who had patronized the work of the Italians. But as Francis Haskell long ago noted, Thoré was also particularly invested in an art that appeared to speak to the human condition.[1] Though he could write warmly about landscapes and still lifes—as in his enthusiastic tributes to Vermeer’s *View of Delft* and *The Little Street*—his idea of Dutch art was first and foremost the one he attributed to his beloved Rembrandt: “The essence of his work is the representation of human subjects.”

Something akin to Thoré’s spirit continues to animate the Leiden Collection, whose Franco-American founder, Thomas S. Kaplan, has spent the last two decades amassing one of the largest collections of Dutch art in private hands, virtually all of it focused on the human figure. The seventy-six paintings from the collection currently on view in the exhibition “Art and Life in Rembrandt’s Time” at the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach constitute about a third of the total, and at their center, figuratively if not literally, are seventeen works by Rembrandt that span his career, from three allegorical panels executed when he was barely twenty to a moving image of an elderly woman from the last decade of his life. By Kaplan’s own account, he fell in love with this “Universal Artist” at the precocious age of six, when his mother took him to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Though the first Dutch painting he eventually purchased—a diminutive oval portrait of the young lawyer Dirck van Beresteyn (circa 1652)—is by another hand, it has an impeccable pedigree, having been produced by one of Rembrandt’s most successful pupils, Gerard Dou.

The portrait's meticulous brushwork and fashionably dressed sitter may seem far removed from the style we have come to associate with the master. But artists like Dou and his most successful pupil, Frans van Mieris, are central to the story Kaplan hopes to tell. When he refers to the transmission of Rembrandt's "DNA" in the exhibition catalog, he is primarily thinking of the *longue durée*, and the genealogy he has in mind extends from Goya and Delacroix to Lucian Freud and Alice Neel. But Kaplan's personal collecting has concentrated on a more immediate lineage. Named after the city of Rembrandt's birth—the city that also became identified with the so-called *fijnschilders* ("fine painters"), a group that prominently included Dou and Van Mieris—the Leiden Collection is almost as concerned with the master's influence as with the master, and even works partly attributed to his studio are happily welcomed into the family. Though most such works were actually painted in Amsterdam after Rembrandt settled there in the 1630s, their present owner has chosen to keep the focus—nominally, at least—on the place where it all began.

One of the Leiden's rarest possessions is the monumental *Hagar and the Angel* by the gifted Carel Fabritius, who studied with Rembrandt in the early 1640s before moving to Delft, where he died at thirty-two in the explosion of the city's gunpowder arsenal. The only Fabritius in private hands among the scant thirteen that survive, it is thought to have been painted around 1645, which is also the year that Rembrandt's last pupil, Arent de Gelder, was born. The comparatively little-known De Gelder is represented at the Norton by three canvases, including *Healing of the Sick* (circa 1722–1725), created about a half-century after the death of his teacher and a few years before he himself died at the age of eighty-one. Though the curators of "Art and Life in Rembrandt's Time" have chosen to downplay temporal sequence in favor of thematic connections among the images, De Gelder's somber depiction of physical suffering concludes the exhibition chronologically; the earliest painting, *David Gives Uriah a Letter for Joab* (1619), was signed and dated by Rembrandt's teacher Pieter Lastman just over a century earlier.

From the first, the Leiden appears to have been conceived as what its founder calls a “lending library for Old Masters,” and individual works from it had been circulating for more than a decade before Kaplan and his wife, Daphne Recanati, made their ownership public in 2017, with an exhibition at the Louvre of highlights from their collection. Most of the paintings may trace their artistic DNA to a single Dutch city, but the Leiden’s reach has been global, with expanded versions of the Louvre show appearing in Beijing, Shanghai, Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Abu Dhabi. The current exhibition, which first opened at Amsterdam’s H’ART Museum (formerly the Hermitage Amsterdam) last spring, commemorates both the 750th anniversary of that city’s founding and the 400th anniversary of the establishment of its New World outpost in Manhattan. That the paintings are nonetheless making their only US appearance in West Palm Beach may seem surprising, but Kaplan, who moved to Florida as a teenager, seems to relish the opportunity to introduce his collection to viewers who might otherwise have little exposure to seventeenth-century Dutch art.

Perhaps because “Art and Life in Rembrandt’s Time” originally coincided with a celebration of Amsterdam’s history, the introductory essays in the catalog focus as much on life as on art, with short commentaries on the period’s food, music, domestic architecture, and fashion, as well as the city’s importance as a cultural center. Kaplan has elsewhere questioned the usefulness of the expensive tomes that often

accompany such exhibitions, and the catalog seems to have been written with that reservation in mind: entries on individual paintings are relatively brief and apparently aimed at the general viewer rather than the scholarly specialist. But anyone who wishes to know more about the works on display can consult the Leiden's website, which offers extended accounts of each object in the collection, generously supplemented by images of other relevant works from around the globe.

Viewers moved by the encounter between Fabritius's otherworldly angel and the all-too-human figure of the grieving Hagar, for example, can follow up the printed catalog's allusion to the popularity of the subject in Rembrandt's circle by clicking on Dominique Surh's entry for the painting online, where they will find a related etching by the master, as well as two oils that appear to borrow from the Fabritius prototype: a comparatively weaker version by another of Rembrandt's students, Ferdinand Bol, and an anonymous canvas attributed to the Rembrandt workshop. Surh also provides a detailed reception history for the painting, which was long thought to be the work of Rembrandt himself and was later attributed first to Bol and then to yet another Rembrandt student, Govaert Flinck, before being definitively reassigned to Fabritius when the discovery of the artist's signature under infrared light in 2005 confirmed a late-twentieth-century scholar's hypothesis.

The painting's subject took even longer to be decoded. Misled by the absence of Ishmael from the scene, scholars had traditionally assumed that it depicted Hagar's first encounter with an angel, when she flees into the wilderness while still pregnant in Genesis 16. Not until layers of overpainting were removed when the canvas was restored in 2012—a process that also rendered the signature visible—did it become clear that the angel is gesturing at some faint gleams of water and that the picture therefore represents a later episode in Genesis 21, when the despairing Hagar has concealed her child under some bushes because she cannot bear to watch him die of thirst. What we are witnessing is the moment just before she opens her eyes and sees the water, when the angel reassures her that God will take care of the child. As Surh nicely observes, the fact that the water is just barely visible, even after restoration, is a deliberate effect: Fabritius's way of ensuring that our delayed recognition of its presence will "anticipate the awe and revelation of Hagar's own discovery."

Not every work at the Norton—or in the Leiden Collection as a whole, for that matter—can be linked so directly to Rembrandt's circle. Among its other treasures is the only Vermeer still in private hands, *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal* (circa 1670–1675), whose attribution once met with some skepticism but has recently been accepted by most scholars, especially after conservation revealed the luminous surfaces formerly obscured by varnish, and technical analysis demonstrated that the canvas had been cut from the same bolt as the Louvre's *Lacemaker* (circa 1666–1668). But despite Thoré's efforts to convince himself that his beloved Vermeer must have spent some time studying with Rembrandt in Amsterdam, no evidence of such an apprenticeship has ever emerged.

Nor do we have much evidence linking Frans Hals with Rembrandt, though the pair may have briefly worked side by side in Amsterdam, and the Haarlem-based Hals, two of whose portraits are on display at the Norton, was sometimes grouped with the younger painter as a practitioner of the so-called rough manner, their visible brushstrokes distinguishing them from the *fijnschilders*, with their enamel-like surfaces. As Svetlana Alpers has observed, Hals's loose and rapidly applied strokes are actually quite different from the thick layers of pigment characteristic of Rembrandt.[2] But the Leiden Collection is devoted above all to representations of the human subject—the first section of the exhibition is entitled "Rembrandt's Humanity"—and as a portraitist renowned for his ability to capture his contemporaries in paint, Hals clearly belongs in this company.

Hals is nonetheless in the minority here insofar as he seems to have had little interest in painting himself.[3] Rembrandt, of course, was a compulsive self-portraitist who recorded his own features again and again over the course of his career, both in oil and in other media. The Leiden has a relatively early example: signed and dated 1634, when the artist was just twenty-eight, it shows an instantly recognizable young Rembrandt decked out in a fur-trimmed robe and a dark beret angled to shade his eyes. Noting that the picture was painted the year of his marriage to Saskia van Uylenburgh and that the robe resembles a type long associated with scholars, the catalog suggests that Rembrandt was deliberately seeking to counter popular skepticism about the morality of artists by presenting himself in the guise of a respectable suitor.

Presumably Saskia's family had other ways of judging his character, since he was then running the workshop of her cousin, the Amsterdam art dealer Hendrick van Uylenburgh. But Rembrandt was an inveterate role player, as even a glance at his other self-portraits will attest, and he seems to have approached such performances as a way of experimenting, both psychologically and stylistically, with the possibilities his medium afforded him. Respectable as the Leiden's version may be, it retains the shaded eyes that had already become something of a signature—see, for example, his early self-portrait (circa 1628) at the Rijksmuseum—and that manage to convey a sense of hidden depths even in the act of public display. There's a good reason this consummate performer was also the artist whom Constantijn Huygens, visiting the young Rembrandt at Leiden, had first hailed for his ability to capture the "movements of the soul."

A shaded eye is likewise visible—or rather, partly visible—in an early painting by one of Rembrandt's first pupils, Isaac de Jouderville, that hangs at the Norton in a section devoted to "Picturing the Artist." Unlike most of the works grouped under this rubric, De Jouderville's *Portrait of Rembrandt in Oriental Dress* (circa 1631) is not a self-portrait but an imitation of one, having apparently originated in a studio exercise in which students copied freely after the master. The most obvious difference between De Jouderville's painting and its model is the absence of a large poodle in the foreground, but according to the online catalog, which reproduces both pictures, Rembrandt added the dog several years later, leaving only the workshop copy to testify, however unintentionally, to the original composition. Like other paintings now assigned to Rembrandt's circle, De Jouderville's version was long attributed to Rembrandt himself, and though scholars have come to believe that such exercises in imitation were important to his teaching practice, very few additional examples survive.

Among works by Rembrandt's other students on display at the Norton are self-portraits by Flinck and Bol, both of which are clearly modeled on the master's *Self-Portrait at the Age of Thirty-Four* (1640) in the National Gallery in London—itself a deliberate emulation of portraits by Titian and Raphael that then belonged to an Amsterdam collector. Seated at half-length, his arm resting on a ledge and his head turned to face the viewer, Rembrandt calmly stakes his claim to the Italian tradition, even as his conspicuously outdated costume evokes Northern European predecessors like Lucas van Leyden and Albrecht Dürer.

Drawing on their teacher's pose as well as his costume, both Flinck and Bol also manage to emulate his aura of confidence, even as both compound the effect by adopting a gold chain from an earlier self-portrait by Rembrandt now in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum: a mark of nobility that none of these artists had actually been granted by a patron. Self-assertion, it seems clear, can also be a collective style, and despite—or perhaps because of—Flinck's mastery of the signals, his self-portrait of 1643 ironically was sold three centuries later as a Rembrandt. Even after conservators uncovered the artist's signature, the painting was still thought to be a portrait of his teacher, an identification that was corrected only when a scholar recognized Flinck's likeness from a self-portrait in a civic guard painting. When Alpers observed that Rembrandt "is not reducible to his autographic oeuvre," she was apparently thinking primarily about the handling of paint rather than the dissemination of his personal image, but the Norton exhibition gives evidence of both.

That confusion as to just who is represented in Flinck's picture is not uncommon in the history of portraiture, especially, of course, when the sitter has no obvious claim on collective memory. The exhibition categorizes some paintings as portraits despite the current anonymity of their sitters, including a smiling young woman in a magnificent white ruff, signed and dated by Rembrandt in 1633. A different challenge is posed by several canvases whose anecdotal scenes might easily be classed with those representations of daily life we now call genre paintings were we not reliably informed that the sitter in question was the artist himself: Pieter van Laer's *Self-Portrait with Magic Scene* (circa 1635–1637), for example, in which the painter appears in the guise of a magician standing behind a table crowded with the tools of his trade and grimacing in horror as the devil's claws reach for him from the corner of the canvas; or Gabriel Metsu's more lighthearted but anomalous *Hunter Getting Dressed After Bathing* (circa 1654–1656), in which the artist poses naked on a riverbank, surrounded by the tokens of a successful hunt and looking cheerfully out at the viewer. Like Jan Steen's *Self-Portrait with a Lute: Sense of Hearing* (circa 1664), whose subtitle indicates that it probably formed part of a series depicting the five senses, such paintings hover ambiguously on the border between generic categories—at once evidence of the artist's desire to record his features for posterity and a mundane testament to the convenience of using himself as a model.

Some of the most haunting faces in the Leiden Collection, however, occupy a still more ambiguous category: portrait-like paintings that were apparently not meant to function as portraits at all. Lacking any specific reference to identifiable living persons, as in portraiture, or to historical or mythical ones, as in history painting, these so-called *tronies* approach their sitters simply as anonymous models. But unlike a genre painting, which also depends on such anonymity, a *tronie* typically exhibits little interest in action or setting, focusing instead on the facial expression of a single figure. (The term comes from a Dutch word for "face" or "head." Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* is a famous example.) "Art and Life in Rembrandt's Time" offers several fascinating *tronies*, which run the gamut from an elegant *Young Girl in a Gold-Trimmed Cloak*, signed and dated by Rembrandt in 1632, to the late work that the catalog calls *Portrait of a Seated Woman with Her Hands Clasped* (1660), although it acknowledges that, like other late Rembrandts, the painting straddles the line between portrait and *tronie*.

Just what function these images were meant to serve apparently varies from canvas to canvas. Some seem to have been intended as complete paintings in their own right, like *Young Girl in a Gold-Trimmed Cloak*, whose combination of high finish and old-fashioned dress leads the authors of the catalog to classify it as one of the "fanciful portraits" that the artist successfully sold on the open market in the 1630s. (That the same model appears elsewhere in works by Rembrandt

and his circle suggests that neither party to the transaction expected the picture to be understood as a portrait of the girl herself.) Others may have served as studies for subsequent paintings, as the catalog suggests was probably the case for a rapidly executed *Head of a Girl* (circa 1645), whose expression closely resembles that of Mary in Rembrandt's *Holy Family with Angels* (1645) in the Hermitage.[4] Sometimes no verifiable link with a more finished composition survives, yet the *tronie* still appears sketch-like, as if the artist had been working out something for himself rather than creating an object for sale. Nor is it always clear where observation ends and painterly fictions begin. As the catalog briefly spells out the possibilities in Rembrandt's case, "He made head studies, known as *tronies*, from life ('naer het leven'), from memory ('van onthout'), or from the imagination ('uit den gheest')."

Whatever their origins, the results can be haunting. The first Rembrandt painting to enter the Leiden Collection, *Study of a Woman in a White Cap* (circa 1640), happens to be such a *tronie*, and it's easy to see why Kaplan would have been drawn to it. Painted directly on a panel without any underdrawing, the picture has a stoic inwardness that is all the more moving because its plainly dressed subject appears to be a mature servant rather than the sort of person who would ordinarily sit for a portrait. According to the online catalog, subsequent hands apparently sought to compensate for her low social status by obscuring her simple white collar with a border of fur. Presumably they sought to upgrade the status of the painting too, since the result more nearly resembled a formal portrait, which is how the work first entered the Rembrandt canon in the nineteenth century. But more than a respect for historical accuracy accounts for the fact that modern viewers are likely to prefer the restored version. Both the dignity of the anonymous subject and the immediacy of Rembrandt's brushwork give it an appeal that a finished portrait of a paying customer can seem to lack, despite the obvious time and effort that have gone into its making.

Perhaps no work in the exhibition better exemplifies the value accorded such studies than *Bust of a Bearded Old Man* (circa 1633), which is at once among the Leiden's proudest possessions and the smallest Rembrandt on record. An ocher-toned grisaille fluently rendered on paper affixed to a panel, it measures just over four inches tall and less than three inches wide, yet the animation of the brushstrokes and the psychological intensity of the subject render it instantly memorable. Seemingly oblivious to the light that illuminates his wrinkled brow and white beard from the left, the old man casts down his eyes—deeply shadowed, in the Rembrandt manner—as if absorbed in some inaccessible world of his own.

Leiden Collection, New York

Rembrandt van Rijn: *Bust of a Bearded Old Man*, circa 1633

Both the tiny size of the sketch and its unusual support have prompted some commentators to speculate that it might be a fragment of a larger work, but Lara Yeager-Crasselt persuasively counters that hypothesis in the online catalog by pointing, among other evidence, to the bold black lines with which Rembrandt framed the image. This effect of a "self-contained work," as the Rembrandt Research Project characterizes it, was later intensified by the sketch's owners, who not only surrounded it with a literal frame, elaborately carved and gilded, but added a velvet-lined traveling case in which that frame can be embedded. Though we don't know who supplied the frame, the case appears to have been the inspiration of Andrew Mellon, who acquired the sketch in 1928 and is rumored to have taken it with him wherever he traveled. Mellon's attachment to this smallest of Rembrandts makes for an engaging story, but the private contemplation to which he thus continually treated himself offers a model of collecting very different from Kaplan's lending library.

Such a determination to keep the *Bust* in view also looks very different, of course, from the vaults in which many contemporary artworks are reportedly stored while their owners wait for them to increase in value. To judge by Kaplan's purchasing history so far, he hasn't been particularly inclined to view his paintings as marketable commodities. But his attachment to his collection and the humanist spirit in which he has assembled it aren't quite as unequivocal as they might seem. The young Kaplan might have fallen in love with Rembrandt, but the slightly older child had another epiphany when he encountered a mountain lion known as the Florida panther, and three years after the adult Kaplan purchased his first Dutch painting, he and the late wildlife biologist Alan Rabinowitz cofounded an organization dedicated to preserving big cats that they christened Panthera.

Around the same time, Kaplan also seems to have decided to violate his usual preference for representations of human figures by acquiring a superb Rembrandt drawing of a young lion who poses calmly, with eyes wide open—no shadows here—and looks straight out at the world. The serendipitous coincidence of Kaplan's two passions may have prompted him to buy the drawing in the first place—*Young Lion Resting* (circa 1638–1642) happens also to have been his first Rembrandt—but this tribute to Florida wildlife ironically didn't make it to Florida. Rembrandt's big cat had instead embarked on a worldwide tour that concluded at Sotheby's in New York, where it was auctioned off to support its living relatives. On February 4, 2026, the drawing netted Panthera $17.86 million. ●