

A Splendid Society of Dutch Old Masters

'Old Masters, New Amsterdam,' mounted in conjunction with the 250th anniversary of the United States, showcases the art of Franz van Mieris and Gerrit Dou, as well as Rembrandt and Jan Steen.



'Young Woman Feeding a Parrot,' by Frans van Mieris, 1663. Detail. Leiden Collection, New York

MARIO NAVES

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New Yorkers who haven't visited the New York Historical Society in recent years are going to find the place a mite less social. Upon making plans to meet a friend at the Society's recently opened exhibition, "[Old Masters, New Amsterdam](#)," I was soundly upbraided for my elitist ways. "Society," I was told, is no longer applicable as it had been removed from the museum's name in the cause of fostering inclusivity, grammar be damned. All I could do was sigh. When will our cultural masterminds stop with their high-minded shaming?

To our fortune, "Old Masters, New Amsterdam" doesn't put on too many airs. The show has been organized by the museum's Director of the New Amsterdam Project, Russell Shorto, and a senior advisor to The Leiden Collection, Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. Don't bother traveling to Holland looking for the Collection's brick-and-mortar location: The works in it are the provenance of Thomas S. Kaplan and Daphne Recanati Kaplan, proud New Yorkers who love 17th-century Dutch painting. Their ardor is strong. Owning 19 works by Rembrandt is the least of it. The Kaplans have the only Vermeer in private hands, "Young Woman Seated at a Virginal" (1670-75).

The Sphinx of Delft isn't found in "Old Masters, New Amsterdam," but there is a generous sampling of noteworthy and often spectacular artists borrowed from the Leiden Collection, along with selections from the holdings of various museums. Rembrandt you know about; Frans Hals, as well. The boisterous and often ribald Jan Steen may be on your radar. But what about Gerrit Dou, Gabriel Metsu or Franz van Mieris, whose diminutive "Young Woman Feeding a Parrot" (1663) is the indisputable charmer of this show?

“Old Masters, New Amsterdam” has been mounted in conjunction with the 250th anniversary of the United States. The museum’s President and CEO, Dr. Louise Mirrer, extols the origins of our fair city, a former Dutch outpost, as “a diverse settlement and a place of commerce, creativity, and conflict, which laid the foundations of the city and nation we know today.” A smattering of corresponding historical artifacts have been included — a 17th-century map of the eastern seaboard by Nicolaes Visscher is eminently gleanable — as is John Turnbull’s “Alexander Hamilton” (c. 1804), an archetypal portrait of a Founding Father and Bank of New York principal.

But mostly the exhibition is an exercise in conjecture. Reasonable conjecture, for sure: The employees of the Dutch West India Company, having arrived on these shores, brought along their native beliefs, customs, pastimes, and habits. Not all of them were consistently applied. Religious freedom was a guiding principle of Old Amsterdam, but the colony’s Director-General, Peter Stuyvesant, was a headstrong member of the Dutch Reformed Church. He was not fond of Lutherans, Catholics, Quakers or Jews. Stuyvesant’s bosses back in Holland, through no little effort on their parts, kept his intolerant ways in check.

So, yeah, the Dutchmen were canny capitalists, famously intractable, and proudly, perhaps even defiantly, bourgeois. They came, they saw, they brought along with them, if Steen’s kaleidoscopic “Peasants Merrymaking Outside an Inn” (ca. 1676) is an indication, a healthy if sometimes overly applied sensuality. Grant the curators their semiquincentennial feint and then applaud the true basis of “Old Masters, New Amsterdam” — an opportunity to relish the art of a remarkable epoch. The Netherlands no longer refers to the “Dutch Golden Age” because the moniker presumably conceals its less palatable attributes, but you’d best believe The New York Historical had gold or, rather, box office in mind when deciding to host The Leiden Collection.



'Peasants Merrymaking Outside an Inn,' by Jan Steen, 1676. Detail. Leiden Collection, New York

A crowd pleaser it is, “Old Masters, New Amsterdam,” and sometimes crowds are in the right. The exhibition confirms that the art of 17th-century Holland is among the most earthy, unassuming and humane extant. Moralism, materialism, and sentimentality go hand-in-hand with charity, insight and a sense of humor marked as much by mercy as it is by salaciousness. Good Dutch citizens are there for you to meet as are scholars, drunks, the lovelorn and, in the aforementioned van Mieris picture, a silvery quietude that beggars literary explication.

“Old Masters, New Amsterdam” is a gem. Go now. Go repeatedly.