



**“Looking at works by Rembrandt, a self-portrait ‘addict’, brings visitors back to the Dutch Golden Age”**

*“Rembrandt and His Time – an Exhibition by the American Leiden Collection” was launched at the National Museum of China. Some 70 paintings, including 11 works by Rembrandt and one by Vermeer (Young Woman Seated at a Virginal), have arrived in Beijing. When gazing at the works of the self-portrait “addict”, visitors are able to return to the Dutch Golden Age.*

If today may well be the age of “selfies”, surely the seventeenth century was the era of self-portraits. The epitome of both that period and genre was Rembrandt van Rijn.

“Rembrandt and His Time – an Exhibition by the American Leiden Collection” was recently unveiled at the National Museum of China. The show represents the first international tour of The Leiden Collection and the most significant exhibition of Dutch Golden Age paintings ever held in China.

The Leiden Collection was named after Rembrandt’s hometown. It was established in 2003. Comprising some 250 masterpieces, the Collection is the largest and most important private collection of 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch paintings.

The seventy pieces or so of the exhibition are divided into three major themes: portrait paintings, history paintings, and genre paintings. This includes eleven works by one of the greatest artists of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Rembrandt, as well as Vermeer’s first painting ever to be exposed in Beijing – *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal*. The show also features works by the “Fijnschilders”, including Rembrandt’s first student, Gerrit Dou, and two other outstanding followers, Frans van Mieris and Godfried Schalcken. The exhibition will be held until September 3.

Rembrandt – *Self-Portrait with Shaded Eyes*  
1634, oil on panel, 71.1 x 56 cm

Rembrandt painted this self-portrait in 1634, soon after leaving his hometown of Leiden. While in Amsterdam managing the studio of the famous art dealer Hendrick van Uylenburgh, he married Hendrick’s cousin, Saskia van Uylenburgh, that same year. In this painting, Rembrandt portrays himself as a confident young man, staring at the viewers with self-assurance. The brim of his beret casts a shadow over his eyes. He seems to be looking at the viewers, or trying to hide something.

Rembrandt – *Minerva in Her Study*  
1635, oil on canvas, 138 x 116.5 cm

In the brightly lit room, Minerva is sitting in front of her desk. She is dressed in her blue gown with golden embroidery and a magnificent cloak. Minerva’s posture represents the

classical pose of male scholars in their studies. But here Rembrandt uses it for the virgin goddess of war, wisdom, art, medicine, and textiles. Various symbolic objects are visible, including exquisite tapestries, thick books, a globe, and a shield with a Gorgon's head. The magnificent garments of Minerva reflect Rembrandt's deep knowledge of Homer's epic poems. Indeed Minerva's counterpart in ancient Greece, Athena, makes a magnificent coat for herself in Homer's "Iliad".

Rembrandt – *Unconscious Patient (Allegory of Smell)*

Circa 1624-1625, oil on panel, 31.75 x 25.4 cm

When analyzing the painting process and the use of pale mauve, blue, and gold, one can tell the similarity in style that exists between this particular piece and the other works belonging to the "Senses" series. This painting was produced circa 1624-1625 and depicts a young man who has fallen unconscious during a treatment. He appears in a prominent place in the foreground, lying on the chair with his colorful striped robe half open. An old woman is trying to wake him up with smelling salts, while a "doctor" stands by hopelessly. Simple equipment is displayed on the wall behind the doctor, who is dressed in old-fashioned clothes. In light of these details, one can infer that this person does not seem very knowledgeable about his profession.

Jan Lievens – *Self-Portrait*

Circa 1629-1630, oil on panel, 42 x 37 cm

This piece represents a close-range self-portrait characterized by a bold composition. The artist's head and shoulders occupy a large proportion of the picture. His piercing eyes and long, flowing hair are the highlight of the painting. Gazing to the right, he seems to be looking at something intently, or studying his own facial features carefully. The spontaneous brushstrokes, soft light illuminating his hair, and the scarf tight around his neck seem to illustrate his passion and spirit. This painting belongs to Lievens' early works, produced when he was highly productive and displaying superior skills. Lievens and Rembrandt frequently exchanged artistic ideas and techniques. At the time, no one could predict which one of them would achieve the highest artistic feats.

Johannes Vermeer – *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal*

Circa 1670-1672, oil on canvas, 25.5 x 20.1 cm

In both style and execution, this small masterpiece is similar to Johannes Vermeer's other late depictions of young women playing musical instruments. As her fingers gently touch the keyboard, the young woman seated at the virginal looks at the viewer with a smile on her face. Her pause suggests a momentary sense of privacy and a perceived quiet feeling, creating a sense of tranquility. The light streaming in from the window above illuminates half of her face, along with her pearl necklace. Those details, together with her satin petticoat and red ribbon decorating her curls, show her upper-class upbringing. In Vermeer's oeuvre, music making by young women always serves the purpose of courtship. Viewers can here portray themselves as the potential suitors.

Isaac de Jouderville – *Portrait of Rembrandt in Oriental Dress*  
Circa 1631, oil on panel, 70.80 x 50.50 cm

Jouderville was among Rembrandt's first students. This piece was produced circa 1631, just before the end of his time in the master's studio. The portrait depicts the elegant demeanor of Rembrandt in oriental dress. His fanciful costume includes a colorful turban with a feathered aigrette, along with a silk tunic tied by a sash at the waist. He is holding a cane in one hand and resting his other hand on his waist. The subject stares at the viewers with confidence. This painting is of great significance in understanding Rembrandt's early teaching methods, as it represents a copy of the 1631 self-portrait by the master. Unlike the original version, Jouderville's work features more intense *chiaroscuro* and a more dramatic color scheme.

*Rembrandt: A biography – The Painter from Leiden*

Born in 1606, Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669) was a miller's son. Although hailing from an ordinary background, he had access to the lives of intellectuals through the town's university. Leiden was also a textile center. Jan Lievens lived there at the same time. As both a friend and a rival, he was an important artist to Rembrandt. Another painter who had a great influence on the master's early career was Pieter Lastman, from whom Rembrandt learned how to depict grand and dramatic historical scenes as well as biblical and ancient themes. Rembrandt set off on his artistic journey under the influence of Lastman and other Leiden artists.

Some observers argue that Rembrandt invented a new style in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, using darkness to contrast brightness. Based on Caravaggio's *chiaroscuro*, his depiction of light was nonetheless more nuanced, more holistic, and stronger than Caravaggio's, and developed into a unique style of his own. The impeccable control of his brushstrokes, the layered and dramatic scenes, the use of light to accentuate shape, his sense of space and highlighting of focal points, all combined to form Rembrandt's individual style. Fromentin, the 19<sup>th</sup> century French painter and art critic, called him the "firefly". His color scheme was deep and intense. With dark brown as the background, the master used the limited bright colors with caution. This unique technique of depicting the contrast between light and shade was well regarded at the time.

*The Night Watch became the turning point of his life*

The 1630s proved to be the happiest decade in Rembrandt's life. As a painter, he gained widespread fame. *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* was produced during that period. The characters portrayed in the piece were members of the Amsterdam guild of surgeons. Depicting a group of characters was indeed a popular theme then. But most such paintings with just a line-up of subjects actually lacked artistic concept. Contrary to the approach of similar works, Dr. Tulp stands on the right side in Rembrandt's piece. While performing an autopsy, he is also shown carefully explaining. Other people are listening attentively. Because it tells a story and vividly depicts each character at the same time, Rembrandt's painting is highly expressive.

Being a successful painter, however, did not make Rembrandt business savvy. Instead, he kept pursuing new and more powerful artistic styles. *The Night Watch* represented his most famous painting, but also the one that plunged him into legal trouble. The piece was commissioned by the musketeer branch of the civic militia in Amsterdam. In the scene, the militias were about to set off on an urgent mission. Because the painter did not depict each character as requested by the commissioner, but rather focused on illustrating a dramatic scene, the work was refused upon completion. The case was brought to court and Rembrandt ultimately suffered both financially and personally as a result.

#### *Self-portrait of life's ups and downs*

Rembrandt's numerous self-portraits reflect the ups and downs of his life. In his early works, the young Rembrandt appears wealthy, confident, and always dressed in velvet and fur. He leads a large studio in Amsterdam full of apprentices studying under and working for him. With Rembrandt at the center, these individuals form a large artistic circle in which creative ideas are exchanged.

During the 1650s, Rembrandt is poverty-stricken. Following *The Night Watch's* controversy, commissions slow down and his financial situation worsens. His house is in need of repair and his studio poorly managed, producing paintings that do not cater to the market. Even more tragic, the master loses his wife and three of his four children.

In the self-portraits that follow this period, Rembrandt looks aged and saddened by the hardship. The misfortune of his career and personal life plunged him into poverty and misery. At the same time, it gave him a deeper understanding of life. In his late years, Rembrandt painted many religiously themed pieces with profound meaning. After experiencing the vicissitudes of life, the artist once again displayed self-respect and dignity in his self-portrait, showing a calm and transcendent soul.

From youth to old age, Rembrandt's self-portraits not only constitute a record of history, but also represent a personal account of his spirit, illustrating his strength and resilience in the face of life's adversities.

#### *Information about the exhibition:*

*"Rembrandt and His Time – an Exhibition by the American Leiden Collection"*

*Date: June 17-September 3, 2017*

*Venue: South Hall 8, National Museum of China*