



For almost two years, the galleries housing the National Gallery's collection of Dutch and Flemish art have been closed for renovation. They've recently reopened, and old favorites by Vermeer, Rembrandt, and Rubens are back on view. This winter, make a special visit to the West Building Main Floor galleries 46–51 to see paintings and prints by Rembrandt. One of the most celebrated Dutch artists, Rembrandt developed a personal style that can be explored in the exhibition *Rembrandt's Late Religious Portraits*, on view January 30 through May 1, 2005. While you're here, make sure you visit the Gallery's permanent collection, too.

Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Mill* (detail), 1645/1648, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Widener Collection

who? what? how?

1

Living in a Golden Age

Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn (1606–1669) was born near the town of Leiden, in Holland, where his father owned a mill on the banks of the Old Rhine. The mill was called “De Rijn,” which is Dutch for “the Rhine,” and that’s how the family got their name. Rembrandt trained to be an artist, and once his career had taken off, he decided to sign his work with his distinctive first name only.

Around 1632 Rembrandt moved from Leiden to Amsterdam, where citizens of all incomes—from humble craftsmen to wealthy businessmen—bought art. In the seventeenth century, Holland became a rich and powerful trading nation. Amsterdam was the busiest port city in Europe, and its markets were filled with fabrics, spices, art, flowers, fish, and cheese. This period in Dutch history is often called the Golden Age, because art, philosophy, literature, and the sciences flourished.

Rembrandt quickly established himself as the foremost artist in the city. He painted a wide variety of subjects—portraits of middle-class merchants and wealthy professionals, pictures of historic events, and stories from the Bible and Roman mythology. Rembrandt’s workshop was a school and production studio where pupils lived, studied, and worked alongside him.



2

Country Walks

Rembrandt didn’t always work inside his studio. Often he went for walks in the countryside to observe nature and took along his sketchbook. He made drawings of the rural environment—the farms, marshes, trees, boats, bridges, mills, cottages, and vast sky—that made up Holland’s unique landscape.

This drawing shows a view over the Amstel, an important river that had been channeled into a canal running right through Amsterdam. Rembrandt followed the river south, out of the city, and made this picture showing the gateway to Amsterdam. Small boats navigate the many canals that crisscross the country, transporting goods and people.



Above: Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait (detail)*, 1659, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Andrew W. Mellon Collection

Left: Rembrandt van Rijn, *View over the Amstel from the Rampart*, c. 1646/1650, pen and brown ink with brown wash, National Gallery of Art, Rosenwald Collection

Right: Rembrandt van Rijn,
The Mill, 1645/1648, oil on
canvas, National Gallery of Art,
Widener Collection

Below: Rembrandt van Rijn,
The Windmill, 1641, etching,
National Gallery of Art, Gift
of W.G. Russell Allen



3 Wind Power

It's hard to imagine the Dutch landscape without windmills. With much of the country below sea level, windmill power was used to drain the land of water so that it could be farmed. Windmills were also used for grinding corn and barley. They contributed to the country's productivity, and the Dutch were proud of this source of prosperity.

In this etching, Rembrandt describes an eight-sided grain mill and nearby cottage with great detail. As a sign of national pride, people collected pictures of the local scenery, and prints such as this one were in demand.

4 Light and Shadow

Although Rembrandt made many landscape drawings and prints, he made few landscape paintings. *The Mill* is his largest. This painting does not depict a specific place but instead is an imaginary scene of ideas Rembrandt collected in his drawings. The windmill sits high upon a hill, its sails full, silhouetted against a cloudy sky. Rembrandt was interested in the effects of changing weather; here he shows the sunlight breaking through the clouds after a storm.

Around the windmill, people are engaged in everyday activities. Find:

- a woman washing clothes at the edge of the river
- a fisherman rowing home from sea
- a woman with a pail and her child
- a herd of cattle across the river

The land and people are engulfed in deep shadow, while the sunlit windmill, on high ground, stands out against the sky. Rembrandt is known for his strong contrasts of light and dark. He used light to highlight some areas of a picture and then left other parts in shade. This technique, called *chiaroscuro* (from the Italian words for “light” and “dark”), made an ordinary scene dramatic. Rembrandt composed many of his portraits, such as the *Self-Portrait* reproduced on the previous page, in a similar manner—casting light on the face to draw attention to it and leaving much of the body in shadow.

learn more

Children's Books

These books about Rembrandt can be found in the Children's Shop located on the Gallery's concourse level or at your local library or bookstore.

Hana in the Time of the Tulips

By Deborah Noyes, illustrated by Bagram Ibatoulline
ages 4 and up

Rembrandt

(See and Do Children's Book)

By Ceciel de Bie and Martijn Leenen
ages 6 and up

Rembrandt and Seventeenth-Century Holland

By Claudio Pescio
ages 8 and up

Web Tours

Check out these Web tours to learn more about Rembrandt and Dutch art.

www.nga.gov/feature/artnation/rembrandt/index.htm

www.nga.gov/collection/gallery/dutch.htm

www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2005/rembrandt/rembrandt_ss1.htm

Family Audio Tour

Adventures in Art, a special audio program for children ages seven to twelve, highlights the Gallery's collection of seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish paintings. Travel with Pieter and Tanya as they explore life and art four hundred years ago. The audio program is available to rent from the Acoustiguide desk located in the West Building Rotunda. \$3.00 per tour; \$2.00 for additional headphones.



1. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait Drawing at a Window (detail)*, c. 1648, etching, drypoint, and burin, National Gallery of Art, Rosenwald Collection

2. Judith Leyster, *Self-Portrait Drawing (detail)*, c. 1630, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss

3. Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait*, 1889, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. John Hay Whitney

try this!

activity

Self-Portraits

Rembrandt closely studied his own face and sketched, etched, and painted himself more than one hundred times. His self-portraits show him young and old, with different facial expressions, dressed in fancy clothes and in plain clothes. He even painted himself wearing theatrical costumes and elegant hats.

Look at the self-portraits on the left. What do they have in common? How are they different?

In the etching, Rembrandt has shown himself in the act of drawing. The two paintings are self-portraits by other Dutch artists Judith Leyster (1609–1660) and Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890). Though painted at different periods in history, these self-portraits have something in common: they picture both artists with the tools of their trade—paintbrushes and palette. A self-portrait could be a self-advertisement, letting people know about the artist's skill.

Make a self-portrait

You will need:

- a mirror
- paper
- crayons, markers, colored pencils, or paints

Making a self-portrait is a way of getting to know yourself. First, think about these questions: What makes you who you are? How can you express your interests? Your dreams? Select clothing that reflects something about you. You might also want to include objects in your picture that help describe your personality. Think of a self-portrait as a personal introduction. What do you want to tell people about yourself? How do you want people to remember you?

Next, study yourself in the mirror. What features make you unique? Try out different facial expressions—smile, frown, or laugh. Strike different poses. Do you want to look relaxed, physically active, or deep in thought?

Then, using crayons, markers, colored pencils, or paints, try to capture your appearance and character on paper! Like Rembrandt, you may want to experiment by creating many different self-portraits.