Royal Ontario Museum gets history down to a fine art

In the Age of Rembrandt puts the Dutch Golden Age in the spotlight, but it's as much social document as cultural attraction

KATE TAYLOR

OPINION

A new exhibition of Dutch art at Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum includes a couple of those intensely observed flower paintings so typical of the Golden Age. In Rachel Ruysch's *Still Life with Flowers* (1709), a clutch of roses, tulips and marigolds presents the beauty of life, while one broken stem serves as a reminder of death.

Few visitors to this show, titled In the Age of Rembrandt, could be expected to have heard of Ruysch, the rare female artist, but the male peers who surround her in this selection from Boston's Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) are, in many cases, equally obscure.

The show includes three Rembrandt portraits – starting with the wonderfully penetrating *Portrait of Aeltje Uylenburgh* that opens the proceedings – as well as two by Frans Hals, but also genre pieces, biblical scenes, landscapes and cityscapes by figures better known to art historians than the general public.

The exhibition, curated by Ronni Baer for the MFA, is a testament to the remarkable depth and spread of painting in the Netherlands in the 17th and 18th centuries, but it's one that positions the work as a social document as much as a cultural achievement.

Take, for example, the awkward *Portrait of a Boy Holding a Basket of Fruit* by Jan de Bray. Creeping ivy oddly overtakes the boy's arm but he holds firmly to the (cultivated) fruit, indicating that culture will dominate nature when it comes to his education.

The symbolism is simultaneously obscure (at least to a 21st-century viewer) and clunky; the painting is more effective as evidence of 17th-century ideas about schooling than as a portrait. Similarly, scenes such as that of a woman cheating at cards or another begging a usurer for mercy open a window into a period when rising wealth was creating inequity and insecurity as certainly as it does in our own.

Josh Basseches, director and chief executive of the Royal Ontario Museum, stands beside Rembrandt's Portrait of Aeltje Uylenburgh. The museum's new exhibition includes three works by the 17th-century painter, but also many pieces by figures better known to historians than the general public.
PHOTOS BY FRED LUM/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Frans Hals, whose Portrait of a Man is seen above, is another world-famous name who appears in the show. But the scope of works assembled by curator Ronni Baer, below, points to the depth and spread of painting in the Netherlands in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Meanwhile, several church interiors offer a spiritual counterpoint: Pieter Jansz. Saenredam's precise architectural views show sparse, light spaces built in yellow stone; Emanuel de Witte's dark paintings feature more dramatic settings, where little genre scenes play out beneath soaring vaults.

This exhibition marks the first time in 50 years that any Toronto institution has shown this period of Dutch art, and for the ROM, it represents an opportunity to remind visitors the museum is not just a venue for dinosaurs, mummies and minerals.

Reaffirming its mandate to show fine art as it continues to assess what it means to be a universal museum in the 21st century, the ROM has installed In the Age of Rembrandt directly across from its European galleries.

That large but somewhat forgotten suite is devoted to interiors where a Dutch painting or two would not look out of place amid the burnished furniture, rich textiles and delicate china. The earliest displays actually overlap with Rembrandt's period.

Certainly, seeing the Dutch art at the ROM places it in a larger context than you would expect at the MFA, or the Art Gallery of Ontario for that matter, where you might demand more masterpieces and less history.

Baer's show is filled with information about the rise of the Dutch republic as an urban trading nation, so that fictionalized Mediterranean landscapes are proof of the Dutch yearning for foreign adventure while Hals's fabulous *Portrait of a Man* is as much about the subject's Japanese housecoat as it is about his amused self-confidence.

Still, she devotes one section to demonstrating the difference between two key Dutch artistic techniques: the smooth style or "fine painting," characterized by the tiny brushstrokes that create the precise naturalism of those flower paintings, and which was pioneered by Rembrandt's apprentice Gerrit Dou; and the looser, broad brushstrokes favoured by Hals.

Of course, the modernist prejudice is to favour the looser style – after all, its realization that the eye could mix colour itself foreshadows impressionism – and in this section, Hals's small portrait of a preacher is an excellent example, all spotty up close, all lively from a bit farther back. But if the art of the Golden Age does more than document its time, it can surely generate a reverence for the equally impressive naturalism of which Dou was such a master – and Ruysch such a mistress.

The exhibition ends with a rare pair of Rembrandt's full-length portraits, images of Rev. Johannes Elison, a Dutch minister stationed in Norwich, England, and his wife, Maria Bockenolle, commissioned by their wealthy son in Amsterdam. Vast studies in dark tones and precise shadows in which the sitters' pale faces, white collars and an open Bible provide the sole contrast to their black clothing, they are early Rembrandt, tighter and sharper than the gentle brown paintings so famous today.

The couple preside over this display of their culture with a confidence and a clarity one cannot fail to admire.

In the Age of Rembrandt: Dutch Paintings from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, continues to Sept. 15 (rom.on.ca).