

## Descriptive Audio Tour:

# *In the Age of Rembrandt: Dutch Paintings from the Museum of Fine Arts Boston*

### STOP 1 - Welcome/Introduction

#### 8.1 Touchable map

Welcome to the *In the Age of Rembrandt: Dutch Paintings from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*. This exhibition was curated by Ronni Baer, the Boston museum's former curator of European paintings, to celebrate an extraordinary gift of Dutch paintings from two private family collections. These new additions make the Boston museum's collection one of the great repositories of Dutch paintings outside The Netherlands. It is our great pleasure to bring these works to Toronto and share them with you.

The ledge in front of you holds a touchable map of The Netherlands. The Netherlands is the name of the country we sometimes mistakenly call Holland. In fact, Holland refers only to two of the country's twelve provinces - North Holland and South Holland. The biggest cities are clustered here, including Amsterdam, along with most of the population. This was also true during the 1600s, a period known as the Dutch Golden Age because of the remarkable prosperity and tremendous artistic output. It was during this period that the paintings in this exhibition were created.

The geography of The Netherlands played an important role in ushering in this Golden Age. As you can feel on the touchable map, about half the country is bordered by the North Sea. This helped The Netherlands

become a major hub for international trade. To contextualize the history, the Eighty Years' War officially ended in 1648, and during the Golden Age, the newly-formed Dutch Republic was finally free of Spanish Rule. A monopoly on maritime trade in goods and people - both enslaved and exiled - and the resulting growth of cities brought economic stability and new wealth to many Dutch people.

In this period of rapid colonial and economic expansion, the Dutch art market flourished. All but the poorest households owned paintings, and more than a million works were created. Artists apprenticed with a master painter from a young age. Most were men - only about a dozen women gained master status from the Dutch artists' guilds. At the next stop, we will explore a painting by one of the few women painters of the Dutch golden age.

By the way, if you are wondering why the people of the Netherlands and their language are called Dutch, you're not alone! On the touchable map, you may notice that the southern border of the The Netherlands tapers into a narrow land mass. To the west of that border is Belgium, and to the east is Germany. In German, the language and people of the country are called "*Deutsch*". Over time, English-speaking people applied this name to the whole region, and it stuck.

Let's explore the paintings in this section of the exhibition. The next stop is directly behind you.

## STOP 2 - Section 1: Detail

### 1.8 *Still Life with Flowers*, Rachel Ruysch

The paintings in this exhibition are grouped by theme, instead of by artist or time period. The theme in this section is DETAIL, because there's more to these paintings than meets the eye.

Despite the seeming realism of Dutch painting, artists balanced direct observation with invention. They included curious details as clues for understanding the paintings on a deeper level. These paintings were meant to be deciphered, like a puzzle or a riddle, with the viewer enjoying the delight of discovery and the recognition of layered meaning.

The telling details in these paintings were often familiar to Dutch viewers of the 1600s. Coins and other signs of wealth could be associated with the sin of avarice - greed for money or material goods. Children's games, such as blowing bubbles, might suggest the fleeting innocence of childhood and its whimsical pastimes. Paintings called "*vanitas*" used motifs such as a skull, an hourglass, or books to suggest the brevity of life.

This painting is called *Still Life with Flowers*. Still lifes show careful arrangements of objects, typically bowls of fruits or vases of flowers, often on lush tables overflowing with common or luxury goods. They were hugely popular during the Dutch golden age, and viewers enjoyed finding the symbolism in the artist's selection and composition of objects.

In this painting, a bouquet of flowers cascades from a glass bowl vase set on a wooden table. The background is dark, nearly blank, so that the flowers shine brightly in contrast. Roses in pink, red, and white are shown in varied stages of opening. Tulips in several colours are arranged among the roses, several with variegated petals in red and white or yellow and orange, along with lilies and apple blossoms. The arrangement fills the canvas and is in the shape of a pyramid, wider at the bottom and pointed at the top. The artist creates her signature composition—a dominant "S" curve—connecting the stem of the tulip

at upper right to that of the marigold, which droops below the table-top.

Fleetingly beautiful, flowers were a metaphor for the brevity of life. To emphasize the point, the artist, Rachel Ruysch spotlighted the marigold's broken stem, reminding us that life is as fragile as a flower.

Ruysch who lived from 1664 to 1750, was one of the few prominent female artists of her time. She was first exposed to botanical specimens through her father, Frederik, a botanist and anatomist in Amsterdam, and went on to have a long and successful career as a painter. She specialized in flower and fruit still lifes, earning more for her paintings than most of her male contemporaries. Rachel Ruysch raised ten children and was still painting well into her 80s.

## STOP 3 – Section 2: Style

### *2.5 Young Girl Eating Sweets, Godfried Schalcken*

This section contains ten paintings that show variations in STYLE from smooth to rough. This refers to two ways of wielding the paintbrush.

Two painters whose paintings represent these two styles, are Gerrit Dou and Frans Hals. Gerrit Dou was one of the most highly paid painters of the Dutch Golden Age. He developed a style known as smooth or fine painting because of the tiny, careful brushstrokes he used. Small in scale, his labour-intensive paintings earned the artist great fame and fortune during his lifetime. His style was praised because it, quote, “engag[es] the eye of the viewer for a long time, delighting his eyes and affecting his heart”, end quote.

At the other end of the spectrum is the art of Frans Hals, whose loose, broad brushwork gives his sitters immediacy and brilliance. A

contemporary described his late work as, quote, “very rough and bold, nimbly touched and well-ordered. They are pleasing and ingenious and, seen from afar, they seem alive and appear to lack nothing”, end quote.

This painting is entitled *Young Girl Eating Sweets*. This is a very small work, measuring only 13 by 15 inches (or about 33 by 38 centimetres), including the frame. It shows a teenaged girl with dark eyes and blonde hair in a messy bun. She wears an orange dress with puffed sleeves and over it, a sheer white shawl and apron. She has just dipped her finger into a silver bowl of sugar - a costly product imported from the Caribbean - and is about to lick it off. She looks directly at the viewer, her tongue sticking out slightly. The window behind her is open, revealing the neighbouring building, a tree, and blue sky with puffy, white clouds in the background.

The artist, Godfried Schalcken, was a student of Gerrit Dou. Schalcken developed a style of painting even more refined than his teacher's. His brushwork is so fine and smooth, that you can't see the individual strokes, resulting in polished, mirror-like surfaces. Here, this shows in the shimmer of the young girl's dress, on the blue velvet tablecloth covering the table where her elbows rest, and in the way the luminous sugar bowl reflects her fingers.

Schalcken's younger sister, Maria, was also an artist. She learned her smooth style from her brother. The painting to the left of this one, entitled *The Artist at Work in Her Studio*, was painted by Maria Schalcken. For decades, this painting was attributed to her brother until a recent cleaning revealed Maria's signature in the upper left corner. This work features a woman with pink cheeks smiling at the viewer. She wears a blue and gold dress and a white lace shawl. She sits on a red chair before an easel that holds a painting of a landscape dominated by a large tree, with blue sky in the background. There is no record of this

landscape as part of Maria's body of work, leaving us with the mystery of why she chose to include it in this self-portrait.

## STOP 4 - Section 3: Sight

### 3.2 *Judah and Tamar*, Ferdinand Bol

In this section, the paintings all tell stories from the Bible and from antiquity that relate to the theme of SIGHT.

The idea that our senses govern the way we understand the world was revolutionary in Europe in the 1600s. Empiricism—the theory that knowledge comes from sensory experience—spurred scientific inquiry and discovery by the likes of Galileo, Isaac Newton, and Antonie van Leeuwenhoek, a Dutch biologist who developed the microscope and described micro-organisms.

Sight was considered the most powerful of the senses, and the Dutch were fascinated by all manner of visual representation - from maps to books to paintings. While scientists viewed nature through magnifying lenses, artists experimented with optics to create realistic effects of light, shadow, and colour. Such Dutch innovations reflected new ways of seeing, even as the senses remained tied to traditional Christian ideas about sin and virtue.

The painting before you is entitled *Judah and Tamar*. It was made by Ferdinand Bol, who lived from 1616 to 1680 and trained in Rembrandt's workshop. Like many of Rembrandt's pupils, Bol developed a style of his own that was smoother and lighter in colour than his teacher's. He made this painting in 1644, relatively early in his career. He went on to specialize in portraits and became one of the leading painters in Amsterdam.

Here, the artist tells the story of the biblical Tamar, who was twice widowed by Judah's older sons. While the patriarch promised her to his youngest, he failed to deliver on his pledge. Tamar refused to accept her role as a childless widow and hatched a plan to assure the continuation of her family line. She disguised herself as a courtesan to seduce Judah.

In this painting, Tamar, a young woman, sits on the right wearing a flowing white dress with a low, square neckline and a pearl necklace. Her expression is troubled, and she grips a staff and cord by her left hip. Judah, an older, bearded man in a dark red robe and gold turban, leans over her right shoulder. One arm is around her and, with his other hand, he offers her a gold ring. Judah looks intently at Tamar's face but cannot see her eyes, which are hidden behind a white veil.

There is a subdued landscape behind them, mostly in shadows, so that we focus only on the two figures. Bol painted the moment of amorous deception when - with her eyes, those windows into the soul, hidden - the beautiful Tamar convinces Judah to offer her his ring, staff, and cord in payment. Later, Tamar uses these belongings to prove that Judah is the father of her twins.

## STOP 5: Section 4: The World

*4.5 An Italianate Landscape with Travelers on a Path, Jan Both, and*

*4.6 Twilight View of Schwanenburg Castle, Joris van der Haagen*

The Netherlands sits at or below sea level -- water is everywhere. It is not surprising, then, that the Dutch were an important maritime power, and at the forefront of shipbuilding. The Dutch designed trade vessels to maximize cargo and efficiency, while armed warships protected the merchant ships.

In the 1600s, The Dutch East India Company and the Dutch West India Company controlled trade with Asia and the Americas. Over 3,000 ships travelled the world, establishing trade monopolies with countries like Japan and Indonesia, and bringing great wealth to the Dutch Republic. But the riches gained through global trade came with a human cost - enslaved people from west central Africa were transported by the Dutch for profit, along with all sorts of luxury goods and commodities.

Although few Dutch artists travelled beyond Europe, they became increasingly interested in painting this expanded world view. By painting foreign goods and lands, Dutch artists reflected their country's primacy in world trade.

The paintings in this section all include elements of THE WORLD beyond The Netherlands.

On the left is *Italianate Landscape with Travellers on a Path*, painted by Jan Both between 1645 and 1650. While living in Rome in the late 1630s, Both began to paint imaginary views inspired by the Italian countryside. This painting shows one of these views, with a rocky mountain on the left covered with tufts of green vegetation and criss-crossed by a small waterfall - all painted in soft, realistic detail. Mountains stretch back into the distance, and a path meanders towards the viewer along the right side, where the travelers are. A man in a blue coat sits on a donkey loaded with bundles. Three other travelers are on the ground beside him, taking a break from walking. Bathed in golden sunlight Both's landscapes allowed Dutch viewers to discover Italy without leaving the comforts of home.

On the right is *Twilight View of Schwanenburg Castle*, painted by Joris van der Haagen in the 1660s. Van der Haagen enjoyed travelling and was especially drawn to the hilly countryside on the Dutch-German



border. He made detailed drawings during his travels that he later used as source material for his paintings. Here, we see Schwanenburg Castle in Cleves, Germany. The castle stands majestically on the left, silhouetted by pale evening light and pink-tinged clouds. The low-lying valley and wooded area at right form a dark backdrop for the foraging cows and sheep that are illuminated by the subtle light reflecting off the water in the centre of the painting.

## STOP 6: Section 5: Landscapes

### 8.3 Touchable Dutch motifs

On this ledge, you can feel some of the Dutch motifs that are so common in landscape paintings of the Golden Age.

In the 1600s, landscape was the most popular subject for Dutch artists, who used canvas and paint to explore local topography and the effects of changing weather and light. Most of the Dutch population was clustered in cities, and for them, these landscapes offered a pleasing view of rural life.

Winter landscapes, known as *wintertjes* in Dutch, were especially loved by both artists and collectors. Europe was colder in the 1500s and 1600s than it is today, giving the period the nickname, the “Little Ice Age.” Harsher weather conditions caused canals and rivers to freeze solid enough to support skating, games, and social gatherings on the ice, as seen in both of these paintings.

This painting is entitled *Winter Landscape with Two Windmills*. It was painted by Jacob van Ruisdael around 1675. This painting is only about two feet by two feet in size, or about 60 centimetres square, including the frame, yet it feels like we are looking at a wide expanse. A frozen river takes up most of the canvas, divided by a wooden dam. You can

feel the frozen river on the touchable ledge, running through the centre of the painting. On shore at the right are two houses or buildings with peaked, snow-covered roofs, as well as a tall windmill. Another windmill is visible in the background. You can feel the roof and the windmill too.

With a low horizon and a high, cloudy sky, the artist creates an impression of space. The muted winter tones are brightened by a patch of blue sky in the centre and the pale, yellow sunlight that illuminates the figures playing *kolf* on the ice, an early version of the game we now know as golf, and some figures who are skating. You can feel the *kolf* players and the skaters on the touchable ledge. You can also feel a bare tree, one of several that line the riverbank, conveying effectively the bitter cold and barrenness of a Dutch winter.

## STOP 7: Section 6 - The City

### 6.2 *View of Haarlem*, Jacob van Ruisdael

The works in this section show the Dutch cities where the artists lived or painted, or buildings they were commissioned to memorialize in paintings. Although they appear true-to-life, many of the buildings in these townscapes were adjusted for artistic purposes - they are often idealized views. And the paintings don't reflect the poverty and stench that accompanied life in a rapidly growing urban environment.

This painting is titled *View of Haarlem* and it was painted by Jacob van Ruisdael, who also painted the landscape we looked at in the previous section. Van Ruisdael is considered one of the greatest landscape painters of the Golden Age. There is often a dramatic element in his landscapes, usually created through cloudy skies that appear to be moving. Such is the case in this view of Haarlem, the city where he was

born. The rolling skies take up the upper two thirds of the painting, with grey-white clouds pushing across fading blue sky. There are fields in the bottom third, close to the front of the scene, with two buildings and some people looking into the distance, where the roof of the Church of St. Bavo can be seen.

Van Ruisdael began painting sweeping views of Haarlem in the 1660s. They depict panoramas of the city, always with the recognizable profile of the Church of St. Bavo on the horizon. He painted this one between 1670 and 1675. Unlike his other works, this painting does not show the city from the northwest but rather from the southwest, as it would have appeared from the dunes near the town of Heemstede.

To the right of this painting is another, also titled *View of Haarlem*. It was made around the same time by Gerrit Berckheyde, who specialized in cityscapes and portraits of city monuments. Berckheyde shows a closer perspective of the city but obscures our view by adding a wall across the middle of the image. The tops of the buildings peek out from behind the wall. In front of the wall is a field where people walk and a man herds two cows along the shore of a lake.

## STOP 8: Section 7 - Portraits/Conclusion

*7.5 Reverend Johannes Elison and*

*7.6 Maria Bockenolle, Rembrandt*

We have reached the final section in the exhibition: PORTRAITS.

Portraits were the bread and butter for artists of the Golden Age. Recent estimates suggest that Dutch artists produced between 750,000 and 1,100,000 portraits in the 1600s. Many of these were commissioned to mark important life events, such as a marriage or the

birth of a child. Others simply served as records of a person's likeness and status. A large number of talented painters offered their services to the ever-expanding middle class.

Artist and theorist Karel van Mander wrote in his 1604 *Book on Painting* that, quote, "The making of portraits from life comprises the largest part of the work which occurs in these lands for a young painter, and...for this reason and for the sake of profit, many keep themselves to a greater extent or entirely busy with that," end quote.

Here, the Reverend Johannes Elison, minister of the Dutch Reformed Church in Norwich, England, is shown in the painting on the left. His wife, Maria Bockenolle, is shown in the companion painting on the right. Both figures look directly at the viewer and wear long, black robes with ruffled white collars. Maria also has white, lace-edged cuffs at her wrists. The minister wears a black skull cap and sits beside a table covered with books and papers, while Maria wears a broad-brimmed, black hat over the traditional white cap worn by Dutch women.

Life-size, full-length portraits like these were typically associated with royal or noble patrons - they were substantially more expensive than the usual bust or half-length formats. That the couple's son, a wealthy merchant, commissioned these imposing paintings from Amsterdam's leading portraitist says much about his social aspirations. This is one of only three full-length pairs by Rembrandt known today.

Of all the Dutch portrait painters, the most esteemed and well-known is Rembrandt. Although he also produced landscapes and one still life, it is in portraiture that he made his biggest mark. He is known for dramatic compositions and powerful use of darkness and light, together with loose brushwork and an uncanny ability to convey the psychology of the sitter. Rembrandt also painted a number of self-portraits, allowing

us to see him as he saw himself, through various stages of his remarkable life.

This concludes our tour. We hope you have enjoyed your visit to *In the Age of Rembrandt: Dutch Paintings from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*. It's been our pleasure to introduce you to some of these works from the Dutch golden age of painting, and we hope to welcome you back again soon.