

Who Are We?

"Rembrandt" exhibit emphasizes context and self-reflection

Was Rembrandt the greatest painter who ever lived? One could probably make the case that he was, indeed, the greatest *portraitist* of all time; or, more specifically, the greatest at self-portraiture. His ever-evolving pictures of himself give an anchor to Western thought and writing about aging the way Montaigne colors discussions of friendship and solitude. But to join the debate, you need to see some of his work.

Through September 16, Oregonians can accomplish that by going to the slyly titled "REMBRANDT and the Golden Age of Dutch Art" exhibit at the Portland Art Museum. PAM has the show because Amsterdam's great Rijksmuseum, undergoing a massive remodel and reopening in 2010, sent its collections out to the world in traveling shows like this. Visitors shouldn't expect a massive number of Rembrandts (unlike what you'll get at the Rijksmuseum soon). The \$15 admission gets you a few of his paintings and etchings — but a treasure trove of context and other wonderful artists and works of art as well. The show is laid out in a way that would make any art historian proud: It sets Rembrandt into the context of his time and lets the works speak to each other.

With an audio tour included in the

admission, both adults and children can gain more insight and interesting information. The goofy youth version features a (supposed) 17th-century child pretending to pop in and out of paintings "with my 21st century friend" — but it's a lot of fun anyway. As usual, audio tours create herd behavior; crowds of people gather around certain works. Wander away from the crowds to see some delightful pieces around corners and out of the way.

One work that deserves even more attention than it gets with the audio tour is the opening piece. Perhaps the greatest of Rembrandt's self-portraits, it's the 1661 *Self Portrait as the Apostle Paul*. The show breaks for gold a bit early here; like the *Mona Lisa* in the Louvre, the painting suffers from the gathering horde, and there's not enough time (nor a place to sit) to spend contemplating the artist's piercing gaze and unflinching look at himself. Yet it's worth time, effort and patience (and a few bumps from other patrons). By 1661, Rembrandt had experienced both great success and massive loss: The death of his wife Saskia (whose portrait hangs in the show); bankruptcy; the sale of his house and his huge collection; paternity lawsuits. His look in this painting conveys depths of passion, grief and acceptance of his human



Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul*, 1661, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam

frailty yet fierce determination to fight on. Truly, this is the centerpiece of the show, and it's hard to move on.

Apostle Paul hangs in a room with a theme of Artists; other themes include Still Life, Countryside, Commerce, Religion, Leadership and Genre Painting (scenes of everyday life). In the Still Life area, Rachel Ruysch's gorgeous *Still Life with Flowers* (1709) and Abraham Mignon's lush, fascinating *Still life with fruit and oysters* (undated) reflect the power of oil paint to make nigh-on fetish objects — but both artists remind viewers that decay is inherent to life. The theme of grasping and getting, of a prosperous society in lust with things, continues in the Commerce area, where the

fine metalwork on display can also be seen in prints and paintings, and where Govert Flinck's massive, sensuously painted *Governors of the Arqubusiers Civic Guard* (1642) hangs.

In the Countryside portion, one of the most delightful paintings is Aert van der Neer's *River View in Winter*, which depicts life on a frozen canal. Kids skate, horse-drawn sledges glide and sober townsmen (or perhaps not-so-sober townsmen) play *kolf*, a kind of hockey-golf. And in the Leadership portion, the standout is a charming Franz Hals painting, *Portrait of a Man, Possibly Nicholas Hasselaer* (c. 1633-1635). Sprinkled throughout are sweet etchings from Rembrandt. Downstairs, in the Religion section, the final excellent Rembrandt painting is *The Denial of St. Peter*. The struggle between Peter's desire to claim his friendship with Jesus and his desire to live shines out even in the midst of a slightly too-crowded canvas.

Don't expect to deal with the intensity of this show and the rest of the museum in one day. Many issues are not parallel, of course, but seeing our culture — our celebration of capitalism, our desires, our love for objects, our religiosity, our love for music — reflected in 17th-century Dutch work creates the need for contemplation. Who are we? Rembrandt asked this — and wasn't afraid to answer. We are the luckier for it.

Because this is a popular show, buy tickets before you go (at www.portlandartmuseum.org) and plan some time to debrief afterwards.

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