

MASTERPIECE
MINUTE



Welcome back to Masterpiece Minute with Doc Brown on Virtual SDMA. I'm your host, Michael Brown, Curator of European Art at The San Diego Museum of Art. Drop in every Friday at 10am to pick up a new mini talk led by SDMA curators and their guests spotlighting works of art from the Museum's collection.

This week we return once again to the world of Rembrandt, this time to look at the most compelling self portrait of the artist's first years as an independent master.

A special loan from the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, Rembrandt's Self Portrait depicts the artist around the age of 22. It's done in oil on a thin sheet of wood—and like many of Rembrandt's panel paintings, it is

in impeccable condition. More on that in a minute!

Many aspiring artists in the Netherlands completed their training by studying in Italy. Yet as we heard in Episode 24, Rembrandt never left the Dutch Republic. He instead chose to set up his first professional studio, a dilapidated walk-up in his native Leiden.

Leiden was Holland's second largest city after Amsterdam, where Rembrandt would relocate three years after painting this self-portrait. While he spent the rest of his life in this bustling metropolis, it was in Leiden right around when he painted this self-portrait that he landed his most enduring patron, Constantijn Huygens, secretary to Frederick Henry, Prince of Orange.

The Stadtholder, as the head of state was known, continued to commission works from Rembrandt until at least 1646.

Of Rembrandt's painting, Huygens wrote "I would place it on par with whatever beauty has been created throughout the ages. I say this in amazement, I salute you, Rembrandt!"

Rembrandt's dozens of self-portraits—all made using one of his many mirrors—had several purposes. They were teaching tools for his numerous students, and as such could be *tronies*, a Dutch idiom for "mugs", to show a range of emotions and light effects. Self portraits were also dazzling display pieces to impress and entice potential clients.



While many of Rembrandt's paintings on canvas feature rough, impressionistic brushwork meant to be viewed from a distance, here he draws us in close with a fine, enamel-like treatment, contrasted with thickly applied highlights. He even used the slender butt-end of the brush to incise c-shaped troughs through the wet paint layer for the curls of his hair.

Back to the painting's condition—it looks much as it did back in the Leiden studio. This is not by accident. Rembrandt was meticulous with his materials and ensured that his paintings would age well. One method he seems to have perfected was adding ground glass to slow-drying browns as a desiccant—like those little preservative silica packs.

One last thing. If you detect a slight difference in Rembrandt's appearance between his etched and painted self-portraits, this is because the print process reverses the image, which is in this case a mirror image. So in his etchings, we see Rembrandt as his friends would have seen him, while in his paintings, we see Rembrandt as he saw himself.

This has been Doc Brown with Masterpiece Minute. Thanks for joining us here on Virtual SDMA—see you next Friday!

