

# In the artist's footsteps

It's 350 years since Rembrandt's death, but in Leiden and Amsterdam you can still feel the echoes...

Words **JULIET RIX**

**R**embrandt stares out at me all around. To one side he is young, eyes shaded beneath tousled hair, to the other he's wrinkled, gummy and turbaned, and in between variously smiling, frowning, astonished, or confident beneath a wide-brimmed hat at a rakish angle. It's a perfect start to my journey in search of the greatest of Dutch masters 350 years after his death, in the home country he never left.

This crowd of Rembrandts occupies the first room of the Rijksmuseum's exhibition of all its works by the artist as the centrepiece of The Year of Rembrandt. Twenty-two paintings – from his only still life to his lustrous full-length portraits, the famous *Jewish Bride* to vast, ground-breaking *The Night Watch* – are displayed alongside 60 drawings and 300 original prints, rarely seen due to their fragility.

It was here in Amsterdam that Rembrandt rose to fame; and here that he died penniless and was buried in an unmarked grave in the city's Westerkerk. But Holland's most famous son was born, raised and started his professional life in Leiden, today a half-hour train ride away. So I check into the friendly little Rembrandt Hotel – no connection, but inexpensive and nicely central – and begin my tour in the artist's footsteps in this attractive, canal-laced, cycle-strewn town.

I start on quiet, residential Weddesteeg, where he was born, probably in 1606, the ninth of 10 children (seven surviving). The house was – shockingly – demolished in the 1970s, but the narrow street still ends at the Rhine

and the picturesque De Put windmill, very similar to the De Rijn windmill owned by Rembrandt's father that stood nearby on top of the city wall (now just a few foundations), grinding malt for making beer.

Heineken is still produced not far from Leiden and here in town beer is consumed in the many pleasant bars, cafés and restaurants that line the waterways, spill across pavements beneath gabled houses and tuck cosily into cobbled alleys. I drop into Waag, for several centuries the Leiden weigh house, now a trendy bar-restaurant with excellent food and the easy, relaxed atmosphere that seems to pervade the town.

It's a historic city kept young by the students of the oldest university in the Netherlands, centred on the same converted red-and-white Gothic convent it occupied when Rembrandt's parents enrolled him there in 1620 at the age of 14. Behind this I find the shady, botanical garden that saw the planting of Holland's very first tulip – an event celebrated in the vivid flower festival held each spring.

"These are the streets of Rembrandt's childhood," says my excellent guide, Marike Hoogduin, as we turn into a narrow alley and look up at the step-gabled, red-shuttered facade of the Latin School where Rembrandt was educated from the age of 10. Just around the corner

we find the great Gothic bulk of the Pieterskerk where Rembrandt's parents were married and buried, and their son baptised. A rehearsal of the Messiah echoes harmoniously around the towering vaults as I admire the glorious, golden 17th-century organ.

Through a pretty courtyard and tiny picturesque



alleyway, we reach the street where Rembrandt became an artist. Always a bit of a rebel, he refused to go to university and was instead apprenticed in the typical Dutch home we now enter. The ground floor opened last year as the Young Rembrandt Studio. None of his student work survives, but an exhibition, Young Rembrandt, opens in Leiden's 17th-century Lakenhal Museum in November, focused on his art before he moved to Amsterdam at the age of 25. Then as now, Amsterdam was Holland's teeming, edgy, commercial capital – just the place for an up-and-coming artist.

I learn more about the source of its wealth and variety beneath the elegant arches of what was once a 17th-century dockside store, now the National Maritime Museum. It's the largest in the world besides Greenwich, with a new wing opening next month. It has a pleasant café, too, with a few specialities including traditional Dutch *speculaas* cookies and – a left-field Dutch favourite – 16th-century Potage à la Reine, a poultry and mushroom soup created for the French royal daughter of Henry II and Catherine de Medici.

The competitive commissioning of wealthy East India Company merchants funded the artistic boom of the Dutch Golden Age and allowed Rembrandt to buy a large waterside home. Inside the Rembrandt House Museum, I stand in the spacious, wood-floored studio where the artist painted for nearly 20 years (until he lost his home to bankruptcy). The elegant front rooms are hung with paintings, as they were when this was the artist's shop window, and the family's living quarters are recognisably where he drew his wife Saskia in her sick bed.

When Saskia died, Rembrandt was working on what would become his most famous painting, *The Night Watch*. Commissioned as a group portrait of Amsterdam's Civic Guard, it hung in their city-centre headquarters until 1715. The building is now the NH Doelen Hotel, which I enter through the bright cream-and-gold foyer beneath the "atom-ball" chandelier to reach my comfortable, entirely contemporary room.

After breakfast I am shown the remains of the old building, now part of the Rembrandt Suite. Here, a partial replica of *The Night Watch* hangs, replacing the original. It is no substitute for the thing itself, however. Time to hop on a boat along Amsterdam's famous canals. We pass towering churches, a Bohemian flea market and many buildings and bridges that Rembrandt would have recognised.

There's a wharf right outside the imposing 19th-century palace of art that is the Rijksmuseum, and just up the stairs inside hangs the extraordinary original painting. It's the ideal spot to end my tour, and Rembrandt is once again peering out at me. His unmistakable face peeps from behind the guardsmen, in a picture that is less formal portrait than 17th-century video installation. It draws you into its variegated chaos of characters, shifting activity, hidden symbolism and

very human faces. It is edgy, individual, avant-garde – characteristically Rembrandt, and utterly Amsterdam. ■

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