

REMBRANDT REMEMBERED

The Dutch master
is being celebrated
this year – *Jenny
Coad* follows his
journey from Leiden
to Amsterdam

Rembrandt was the master of the selfie. His face was a convenient model and he used it to practise capturing expressions – a sophisticated series of emojis, if you like. There's his laughing-out-loud face, his furious face, his lips-pursed-in-surprise face. It's easy to warm to this playful-seeming artist who appears to come alive on paper.

Now is the time to celebrate his work anew, because this year is the 350th anniversary of his death, and everyone is rolling out the Rembrandt red carpet. The Rijksmuseum, in Amsterdam, is showing its world-beating collection of the Dutch master's works, numbering 22 paintings, 60 drawings and more than 300 prints: All the Rembrandts runs until June 10 (£16; rijksmuseum.nl). You'll need energy and sharp elbows to stand your ground in front of his tinier etchings – especially the naughty romps, which caused a stir at the time – but his hurdy-gurdy players, milkmaids, prostitutes and “sleeping puppy” are worth the scrum.

He was the darling of the 17th century – the prosperous Dutch Golden Age – taking advantage of the country's burgeoning wealth. His pupils, including

Ferdinand Bol and Nicholas Maes, went on to become famous in their own right, their works often mistaken for those of their master.

Rembrandt was tireless, producing about 400 paintings, 800 etchings and 1,200 drawings over half a century. Amsterdam was the scene of his success and, ultimately, failure. Despite his fame and associated fortune, he died a pauper.

Any Rembrandt pilgrimage, however, should begin in the city of his birth: Leiden, a 35-minute train journey from Amsterdam Central (£8 one-way; ns.nl). It's a tenth of the size of the busy capital, and more contemplative, although its canals and smart gabled houses are just as seductive. “You need only one bicycle lock in Leiden, while in Amsterdam it would be foolhardy to have less than three,” says my guide, Marike.

Rembrandt was number nine of 10 children, son of a miller. His childhood home on Weddesteege was demolished to make way for a printers, but a stone plaque marks the spot. He was the only one of his siblings to attend Latin school, and it was there that he came under the tuition of his first drawing master.



The school building is privately owned, but you can visit his first studio, where he was pupil to Jacob van Swanenburgh, on Langebrug street. At that time it

overlooked a canal, which must have reflected the light beautifully, but the stinking water was covered up in the 18th century. Inside, I watch an unsettling new 3D film about Rembrandt's life, where his self-portraits blink and water seems to wash over me (open Wednesday to Sunday; free; leiden.nl).

The Museum De Lakenhal, which has been under restoration for two years, is reopening on June 20 with Rembrandt and the Golden Age, an exhibition celebrating his influence during that period (until October 3; lakenhal.nl).

Marike shows me some of the city's secluded almshouses behind heavy wooden doors. Built in the 17th century, they each sit around a serene garden square. She also points out where the first tulip was planted in a gated plot in the Botanical Gardens. "Tulips come from Leiden, *not* Amsterdam," she asserts. And we walk past the pub that the King of the Netherlands, Willem-Alexander, frequented as a student here – the Barrera Grand Cafe. He was, she says, known as the "prince of beer". Good man.

Leiden might have been Holland's second city in the 17th century, but Amsterdam was rapidly expanding, too, thanks to wealthy traders with cash to splash. In 1628, aged 22, **Rembrandt** left for the capital and his career took off.

Everyone wanted to be painted by the talented young artist, who commanded 340 guilders, on average, for a painting – about £16,000 in today's money. Maerten

Soolmans and his new bride, Oopjen Coppit, must have paid top dollar. Their full-length portraits (1634) in the Rijksmuseum exhibition are dripping in finery, from intricate lace cuffs and collars to frou-frou shoes decorated with frilly rosettes. (Remember your earphones – the museum has a brilliant new app that lets you enjoy the commentaries and paintings free of charge, and from home.)

In 1639, at the height of his success, Rembrandt bought a swish house on Jodenbreestraat, where he taught pupils and received clients, offering them a glass of wine from a marble cooler – perhaps so they felt more sanguine about

his prices. This is now a museum, the Rembrandt House, and the interior has been reconstructed using the inventory drawn up when the artist went bankrupt

in 1656 (£12; rembrandthuis.nl). The small room where he printed his etchings contains an old-style press – the walls are covered in ink and, in a demonstration, I learn that the artist would have rubbed the excess ink off the copper plate with his hands – more effective than cloth.

In a dressing-up-box-like room, I discover that Rembrandt spent a great deal of his earnings on art and props. He had drawings by Raphael, Titian, Dürer and Holbein, lavish textiles, classical statues, stuffed animals, Venetian glass and shells. His acquisitive nature contributed to his downfall. "He was a big spender," says my guide, Willemijn. She adds that he had to pay off his son's nurse, who he hired after his wife, Saskia, died in 1642.

That year, he painted one of his most famous works, *The Night Watch*, which,

from July, you can see being restored live (and online) when the Rijksmuseum's conservationists get to work behind a glass box.

Rembrandt died destitute in 1669, outliving his son Titus by a year. His final self-portraits are unflinchingly moving and seem to convey more than the weariness of old age. He was buried in the Western Church, next to Amsterdam's formerly poor Jordaan area. Because he had no money, his grave is unmarked and its exact location uncertain – though historians believe it may be by the north wall. He might not have a headstone, but his face is one of the best-known in the history of art.

Jenny Coad was a guest of Visit Holland (holland.com) and easyJet (easyjet.com)

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DRUM ROLL The Night Watch, painted in 1642

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PAINTERLY
Leiden and,
below, mixing
colours at the
Rembrandt
House museum,
Amsterdam