

Rembrandt van Rijn

As an artist, he knew how to make paintings come alive.

As a man, he knew how to live. Happy 400th!

By AMY ECKERT

YOU'VE SEEN REMBRANDT reproductions, works like "The Night Watch" and "The Sacrifice of Isaac." Everyone recognizes at least one of Rembrandt's works, and no one doubts that he was a genius.

Now try looking at a real Rembrandt up close. Costumes that look flat in a book gain depth in person, slathered as they are with thick dollops of color like icing on a cake. Brush strokes reveal vig-



orous hand movements and fool the viewer into believing that the paint is still wet. Pigments glow in ways they just shouldn't. It's trite but true: Unless you've seen Rembrandt's paintings in person, you really haven't seen them at all.

This is the year to see them for yourself. In a year-long birthday celebration marking Rembrandt's 400th (www.rembrandt400.com), the Netherlands has called in all its favors and guarantees that it will never again be as easy to see so many original Rembrandts in one place. Museums and private collections throughout the Western World have done the unthinkable, gritting their teeth and whispering a prayer as they ship their priceless treasures overseas, back to Holland for the first time since the Golden Age. It's a collection not to be repeated in our lifetimes.

If you want to retrace the master's work from its beginnings, visit Leiden, half-an-hour by train from Amsterdam. It was here that Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn was born in 1606, and here that he began a lifetime of defying tradition. He enrolled at the University of Leiden at 14 to please his parents (they wanted him to have respectable employment), but that's as far as his college education went; he never attended a single lecture. Instead, he took up with a local artist, Jacob van Swanenburgh, to study painting.

It was in Amsterdam that Rembrandt expected to make his living, so at 25 he left home for good. He spent his days practicing chiaroscuro, the use of light and shadow to express significant themes. He worked on facial expressions, making faces in a mirror and duplicating the signs of emotion on canvas: arched brows, puckered lips, alarmed eyes. He aimed for flawlessness.

While perfectionism has its merits, Rembrandt had no interest in living the brooding life of a starving artist. Once his reputation was established in Amsterdam (it didn't take long), he scored a marriage with the wealthy Saskia van Uylenburgh. After her early death, Rembrandt took his young child's nursemaid Geertje as his mistress. When things went poorly with her, he had Geertje committed and took another mistress, Hendrickje.

Rembrandt's professional life was no less intense. He revised etching plates three, four, sometimes five times, giving the public



an excuse to buy more prints. The artist began dabbling as art dealer, selling some paintings (including some by Rubens) and keeping the rest for himself. His showroom always contained a self-portrait, the better to show off his talents recreating faces. And he seldom painted landscapes, believing that any two-bit artist could paint an idyllic scene.

Eventually two mistresses, an expensive personal art collection and the economic havoc wreaked by two Anglo-Dutch wars sent Rembrandt into bankruptcy. He sold all his possessions and his self-portraits grew more somber. When the most famous artist of the Golden Age died in 1669, he was buried in an unmarked grave at the Westerkerk.

Today, the home where Rembrandt lived and worked for more than 20 years is the Rembrandt House Museum. It's the best place to sense the artist's presence. Outside the kitchen a covered courtyard shelters the spot where "The Night Watch" was painted. Upstairs, his studio sits perfectly recreated (after the artist's own sketches), complete with duplicates of Rembrandt's easel and pig bladder paint tubes.

The Rembrandt House presents "The Quest of a Genius" through July 2006, bringing more than 100 paintings, drawings, and etchings back into his studio for the first time since their creation 400 years ago. Beginning in August, the museum stages one of the largest shows ever of his etchings.

The Fort Knox of Dutch Masters is Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum. Here resides the world's largest collection of Rembrandts, including his most famous works: "The Jewish Bride," "The Syndics of the Amsterdam Drapers' Guild," the "Self-portrait of Rembrandt as a Young Man," and "The Night Watch." Throughout 2006 the Rijksmuseum displays all its Rembrandt paintings, including lesser-known works typically held in storage; its collection of Rembrandt drawings will appear on a rotating basis from mid-August through the end of the year. There will even be a select few works hanging in the Rijksmu-



seum Schiphol Airport, including a look at those who tried to pass off their work as his.

Other Rembrandt sites worth seeing in Amsterdam include the Oude Kerk (Old Church) where Saskia is buried and the Westerkerk (West Church) where he was buried. Have lunch at Café de Waag: Formerly the city's 17th-century weigh house, this was the setting for two famous Rembrandt paintings, "The Anatomic Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp" and "The Anatomic Lesson of Dr. Joan Deyman." At dinnertime, d'Vijff Vliegghen restaurant serves New Dutch cuisine in a 17th-century canal house; ask to sit in the Rembrandt room, where four original etchings hang.

In Leiden, the Museum De Lakenhal hosts a complete collection of etchings through the summer; a rare collection of Rembrandt landscapes (yes, he did them) follows, beginning in early October. Nearby, The Hague has its own Rembrandt retrospective at the Mauritshuis: From mid-June through mid-September, all of its Rembrandts will be pulled from storage and surrounded by the works of other Dutch and Flemish masters, including Vermeer, Rubens, and Jan Brueghel the Elder.

Probably the most unusual show of Rembrandt this year is "Rembrandt, the Musical," at Amsterdam's 19th-century Royal Carré Theatre from mid-July through February 2007. His life is recounted in all its detail—in Dutch (but with an English audio translation)—from artistic accomplishments to soap-opera lifestyle. It's one Rembrandt reproduction that really shouldn't be flat. 