



DESTINATION
ART

BY PETER TRIPPI

DISCOVERING THE DUTCH GOLDEN AGE, OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

The great Dutch painter Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669) died 350 years ago — on October 4, 1669.

Not surprisingly, the arts organizations of the Netherlands are proudly marking this anniversary with an array of intriguing projects that appeal to art lovers of all kinds. The master spent much of his life in Amsterdam, so it's logical that exciting activities are occurring there, but this spring I also enjoyed the opportunity to travel beyond the busy western region of the Netherlands — where Amsterdam is located — to four smaller, lesser-known cities that shine additional light on the 17th century, the so-called Golden Age of Dutch painting in which Rembrandt was a leading player.

AMSTERDAM

Naturally I started my adventure in Amsterdam, where most international flights to the Netherlands arrive. For lovers of Rembrandt, there are two museums here that cannot be missed:

REMBRANDT VAN RIJN (1606–1669), *Militia Company of District II under the Command of Captain Frans Banninck Cocq*, better known as *The Night Watch*, 1642, oil on canvas, 149 1/2 x 178 1/2 in., Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam





(TOP TO BOTTOM) Dordrecht's Grootthoofd; the gateway through which dignitaries once entered the city is located beneath the dome. ■ Dordrecht's Huis van Gijn ■ At the Dordrechts Museum, an entire gallery is devoted to the painter Ary Scheffer (1795–1858).

the Rijksmuseum and the Rembrandthuis. The former draws more than 2 million visitors annually, and, although it is wonderful, it can be exhausting pushing through the crowds to see your favorite works.

No visit here is complete without a glimpse of Rembrandt's *Night Watch*, which officially carries the title *Militia Company of District II under the Command of Captain Frans Banninck Cocq*. Hanging at the focal point of the Rijksmuseum's vast Hall of Honor, this oil painting measuring 12 by 15 feet was completed in 1642 for the headquarters of a local civic militia. Long admired for its deft composition, innovative use of light, and unusual sense of movement, *The Night Watch* earned its nickname because it quickly grew darkened by the smoke and dirt around it. It was last restored in 1975 after being slashed by a deranged visitor, and now – this month – the Rijksmuseum's conservators will begin a new treatment expected to take several years. Fortunately, instead of hiding this masterwork away in a laboratory, they will do all their work right where the picture hangs today. The entire process will be streamed online, and visitors will be welcome to ask questions as they look on.

There is more to enjoy at the Rijksmuseum, of course. Earlier this year, its leaders invited members of the public to submit artworks they had made while inspired by Rembrandt; 8,390 entries were received, and soon the best of them will hang here in the temporary exhibition *Long Live Rembrandt* (July 15–September 15). In the autumn comes an exhibition highlighting the close links between 17th-century Dutch and Spanish painting, which makes sense when we remember that the Netherlands had recently broken away from Spanish rule. Organized in partnership with Madrid's Museo Nacional del Prado, *Rembrandt–Velázquez: Dutch and Spanish Masters* (October 11–January 19, 2020) will feature major pictures not only by these two men, but also by their great contemporaries Hals, Murillo, Vermeer, and Zurbarán.

Located not far away is the Rembrandthuis, where he lived and worked from 1639 to 1658. It is a thrill to move through the rooms he occupied, and next door is an exhibition hall where visitors can learn more. On view here through September 1 is *Inspired by Rembrandt: 100 Years of Collecting by The Rembrandt House Museum*. Many visitors do not realize that this institution has acquired more than 4,000 works on paper – made by the master and his followers, and by artists inspired by him much later (including Pablo Picasso, Marlene Dumas, and Glenn Brown).



AELBERT CUYP (1620-1691), *Riders Resting in a Landscape*, n.d., oil on canvas, 46 1/4 x 67 in., Dordrechts Museum, purchased with support from the Vereniging Rembrandt, 1978

Up next is a show sure to intrigue working artists and science nerds. *Laboratory Rembrandt: Rembrandt's Technique Unraveled* (September 21–February 16, 2020) will allow visitors to discover what researchers and conservators have recently learned about how drawings change over time, who might have added what to Rembrandt's etched plates, and more.

HEADING SOUTH

Tired of the crowds, I boarded one of Holland's always-efficient trains and traveled 90 minutes south to Dordrecht, a city of 120,000 inhabitants I had not visited before. (Amsterdam has 830,000 residents, by the way.) I made a beeline for the Hotel Bellevue, which, as its name suggests, has a beautiful view over the broad confluence of rivers that has long made Dordrecht a significant port. The hotel is located next to the Groothoofdspoort, a gate through



which dignitaries once entered the city after arriving by boat. Today the area hums with commercial shipping, with pleasure boats that bob in the marinas nearby, and with ferries that whisk commuters to and from Rotterdam, the much larger city 17 miles to the north.

The historic center of Dordrecht is unexpectedly pretty and unspoiled. Among the sites to inspect as you stroll are the Begijnhof (a picturesque courtyard of small houses occupied by wealthy widows after their husbands died), the Grote Kerk (the largest church in town), and the Hof van Nederland (where in 1572 an assembly of Dutch provinces laid the foundations for the Republic of the Netherlands). Art lovers will especially enjoy the handsome Huis van Gijn, home to the banker and collector Simon van Gijn from 1864 until his death in 1922. I was especially struck by the large number of good antique shops; Dordrecht's tourism office has wisely published a brochure summarizing their hours and locations. I also learned that the

The Kuiperspoort is one of Middelburg's best-preserved streets.

Middelburg's Stadhuis contains the Vleeshal, a venue for contemporary art exhibitions.

Christmas market held here every December is the country's largest.

The city's most important cultural jewel is the Dordrechts Museum, where curator Sander Paarlberg kindly gave me a thorough tour. Ironically, the cream of the museum's superb 17th-century Dutch paintings were then on loan to Ohio's Columbus Museum of Art, but I enjoyed the works that remained, especially those by Aelbert Cuyp (1620–1691), the Golden Age master who was born and died here. Dordrecht also produced the gifted painter Ary Scheffer (1795–1858), who ultimately settled in Paris and became world-famous for his Romantic scenes and portraits. Today he is remembered with a statue in a square named for him, and also by a trove of his artworks bequeathed by his daughter to the Dordrechts Museum. In an era when other Dutch cities were industrializing, Dordrecht remained comparatively unchanged, an advantage that drew artists to paint here from 1850 right up until World War I. The museum shows many of their works, and is now planning two intriguing exhibitions for 2020. First up (February 9–May 31) is a show focused on the gifted Dutch painter Willem Bastiaan Tholen (1860–1931), and in September will

At the Zeeuws Museum, a room full of tapestries commemorates the 1572 Battle of Rammekens, photo: Pim Top





(LEFT) Looking out over the historic center of Hoorn
 ■ (ABOVE) Inside Hoorn's Westfries Museum, the Schutterijzaal is lined with four huge portraits.

the Roosevelt Institute for American Studies, a graduate program in U.S. history operated with the University of Leiden north of here.

Since 1972 the Abbey has also been home to the Zeeuws Museum, which tells the province's story through art and archeology. Particularly memorable is the room full of exquisite tapestries woven to commemorate the Battle of Rammekens of 1572, when the Dutch defeated a Spanish fleet, and also the hypnotically eerie portrait figurines of two 18th-century VOC officials, created by Chinese artisans out of dried clay, bamboo, and paint.

NORTH OF AMSTERDAM

Now it was time to explore two Golden Age communities located north of Amsterdam, rather than south of it. Fortunately, the ports of Hoorn (population 73,000) and Enkhuizen (19,000) lend themselves even more easily to daytripping: from Amsterdam's Central Station, Hoorn takes half an hour to reach by train, and Enkhuizen is another 15 minutes beyond.

Hoorn's Golden Age credentials are evident immediately. In its picturesque Roode Steen ("Red Stone") square stands a statue of Jan Coen (1587-1629), who was born here, founded what is now Jakarta, Indonesia (then the Dutch trading post of Batavia), and became governor-general of the VOC. Alas, Coen's success came

come one about Cuyp's influence on the British artists Thomas Gainsborough, John Constable, and J.M.W. Turner. (Dordrecht has always enjoyed close links with England, through maritime trade and otherwise.)

One cannot truly grasp the fabulous wealth of the Golden Age without considering the Dutch East India Company ("VOC"), founded in 1602 to trade with India and Southeast Asia. It soon became the world's first corporate conglomerate, diversifying into shipping, shipbuilding, slaving, and producing spices, sugar, and wine — from Brazil and New York to South Africa and Japan. One of the VOC's key ports was Middelburg, capital of the southwestern province of Zeeland ("Sealand"), a delta located at the mouth of three mighty

rivers — the Scheldt, Rhine, and Meuse. In fine weather, one highlight of a visit to Middelburg is taking a boat tour of its busy harbor.

Intrigued, I took a 90-minute train ride south from Dordrecht, and was greeted at the station by the archivist-historian Peter Sijnke. He explained that much of Middelburg's historic center was severely damaged during World War II, but the locals wisely rebuilt it; I was especially charmed by the narrow Kuiperspoort, where coopers made barrels for the ships docking nearby, and the ornate façade of the Stadhuis (City Hall). I was fascinated to learn that America's Roosevelt family originated on the island of Tholen nearby; in 1650 one son headed to New Amsterdam (now New York) and so Middelburg's 12th-century Abbey contains

on the backs of many indigenous people, so the Hoorn authorities have posted a sign (in both Dutch and English) that reads: “The statue is controversial. According to critics, Coen’s violent mercantilism in the East Indian archipelago does not deserve to be honored.” This approach offers an intriguing option for the predicament many U.S. cities find themselves in today regarding Confederate statues: the sculpture remains, but its meaning is altered.

Floating in a marina nearby is a replica of the Halve Maen (Half Moon), the VOC ship that Henry Hudson sailed into what is now New York Harbor in 1609. (He was actually seeking a western passage to China, not to sail up what is now the Hudson River as far north as Albany.) This replica was constructed in Albany in 1989 and loaned to Hoorn’s Westfries Museum in 2015. Before the ship returns to the U.S. late this year, visitors are welcome to tour the harbor in it on ticketed excursions.

The Westfries Museum overlooks the Roode Steen and is filled with fascinating examples of art and archeological artifacts from this region. A highlight is the Schutterijzaal, a chamber lined with huge 17th-century portraits of civic militias holding their cherished rifles and other weapons. (It is interesting to note how relatively static and formal these scenes are compared with Rembrandt’s more dynamic *Night Watch*.) The Westfries Museum has made impressive strides in developing virtual-reality headsets that allow visitors to experience how Hoorn looked and sounded in the 17th century: the effect is truly immersive and makes the past come alive, especially for younger visitors who may not otherwise be able to imagine such scenes.

A quick train ride northeast of Hoorn took me to Enkhuizen. From the station, a 15-minute stroll – past the huge Drommedaris (Camel) Gate that is a remnant of the town’s fortifications – brought me to the Zuiderzeemuseum. In 1932, the gigantic Zuiderzee (“Southern Sea”) that dominated the northern Netherlands was split in two by a new barrier dam; suddenly the fishing port of Enkhuizen was cut off from the North Sea, and soon scholars began to collect items that reflected the region’s unique heritage. In 1950 the museum opened to the public as a series of original and replica 17th-century buildings that contain permanent installations and temporary exhibitions of fine and decorative arts, as well as archeological artifacts. Most memorable is the huge Ship Hall, which allows visitors to examine a range of fishing and pleasure boats.



(TOP TO BOTTOM) The Roode Steen is Hoorn’s most picturesque square. ■ Visitors can sail Hoorn’s harbor in a replica of the Halve Maen (Half Moon). ■ The Drommedaris (Camel Gate) is a dominant feature of Enkhuizen’s historic center; photo: Henk Visser.



(TOP TO BOTTOM) A bird's-eye view of the Zuiderzeemuseum in Enkhuizen ■ Amsterdam's NH Collection Doelen Hotel was constructed in the early 1880s. ■ The Doelen's historic lobby has been elegantly restored and updated.

In 1983 Queen Beatrix opened an adjacent site that — like Virginia's Colonial Williamsburg — mimics the atmosphere of the region's villages by integrating original and replica buildings that include a windmill, fish-smoking house, drugstore, cheese warehouse, school, etc. Not surprisingly, the outdoor portion of the museum closes for the winter, which tends to be cold, damp, and windy.

BACK TO AMSTERDAM

When I learned that I would be sleeping at the NH Collection Doelen Hotel, I was delighted because it is located so centrally and has a charming canalside façade adorned with red brick, cream-colored stucco, and gray slate tiles. What I had not known before is that the hotel — completely renovated in 2016 — was built in the early 1880s on the site of the 15th-century tower (Doelentoren) and shooting range (Kloveniersdoelen) where Rembrandt's *Night Watch* hung from its completion in 1642 until 1715. Yes, it was right here that the militiamen depicted in the famous painting actually met, and it was only natural that they wanted it to adorn their large assembly room. By 1715 the picture was considered a civic treasure, so it was carted away to Amsterdam's City Hall (now the Royal Palace) and cut down so that it could fit into a room there. It finally reached the Rijksmuseum when that institution opened in the 1880s, and it is very unlikely ever to leave that building.

My Dutch adventure had truly come full circle, and now I encourage other Americans to explore the Netherlands in similar ways. ●

Information: holland.com, iamsterdam.com, rijksmuseum.nl/en/the-year-of-rembrandt, rembrandthuis.nl, dordrecht.nl, dordrechtmuseum.nl, middelburg.nl, zeeuwmuseum.nl, hoornmarketing.nl, wfm.nl, vvenkhuizen.nl, zuiderzeemuseum.nl, nh-collection.com/nh-collection-amsterdam-doelen

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