



# 1 Living in a Golden Age

Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn (1606–1669) was born near the town of Leiden in Holland, where his father owned a mill on the banks of the Old Rhine. The family derived its name from the mill, which was called *De Rijn* (Dutch for “the Rhine”). Years later, after his art career was established, Rembrandt signed his work with only his distinctive first name.

From his youth Rembrandt trained to be an artist. Around 1632 he moved from Leiden to Amsterdam, where citizens of all incomes—from humble craftsmen to wealthy businessmen—bought art objects. In the seventeenth century, Holland was a powerful nation made rich by trading. Amsterdam was the busiest port city in Europe, and its markets sold fabrics, spices, flowers, fish, and cheese. This period in the nation’s history, when art, philosophy, literature, and the sciences flourished, is often called the Dutch Golden Age.

Rembrandt quickly became one of the leading artists in the city. He painted a wide variety of subjects: portraits of middle-class merchants and wealthy professionals, scenes of historic events, and stories from the Bible and Roman mythology. His busy workshop was both a studio and a school where pupils lived, studied, and worked alongside him.



# 2 Country Walks

Rembrandt didn’t always work inside his studio. Often he went for walks in the countryside to observe nature. He took along his sketchbook and made drawings of the rural environment—the farms, marshes, trees, boats, bridges, mills, cottages, and vast sky—that made up Holland’s unique landscape.

The Amstel is an important river that had been channeled into a canal running right through Amsterdam. Rembrandt followed the river south, out of the city, and sketched *View over the Amstel* looking back toward Amsterdam. Small boats navigate the many canals that crisscross the countryside, transporting goods and people.



above: Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait Leaning on a Stone Sill* (detail), 1639, etching, White / Boon 1969, no. 21, State ii / ii, National Gallery of Art, Rosenwald Collection

left: Rembrandt van Rijn, *View over the Amstel from the Rampart*, c. 1646/1650, pen and brown ink with brown wash, Rembrandt Chronology, no. 13, National Gallery of Art, Rosenwald Collection

right: Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Mill*, 1645/1648, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Widener Collection

below: Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Windmill*, 1641, etching, White/Boon 1969, no. 233, National Gallery of Art, Gift of W. G. Russell Allen



## 3 Wind Power

It's hard to imagine the Dutch landscape without windmills. With much of the country below sea level, windmill power was used to drain the land of water so that it could be farmed. Windmills were also used to grind wheat, corn, and barley. They contributed to the country's productivity, and the Dutch were proud of this source of prosperity.

In the etching *The Windmill*, Rembrandt describes in great detail an eight-sided grain mill and nearby cottage. As a sign of national pride, people collected pictures of the local scenery, and prints such as this one were in demand.

## 4 Light and Shadow

Although Rembrandt made many drawings and prints of landscapes throughout his life, he created few paintings of them. *The Mill* is his largest one. It does not depict a specific place, but instead it is an imaginary scene that Rembrandt devised from his drawings. The windmill sits high on a hill, its sails full, silhouetted against a cloudy sky. Interested in the effects of changing weather, Rembrandt shows the sunlight breaking through the clouds after a storm. People around the windmill are engaged in everyday activities: a woman washes clothes at the edge of the river, a fisherman rows home, and a woman walks with her child.

The land and people are engulfed in deep shadows, while the windmill, sunlit on high ground, stands out against the sky. Rembrandt is known for his strong contrasts of light and dark. He used light to feature some areas of a picture, and he left other parts in shade. This technique, called *chiaroscuro* (from the Italian words for "light" and "dark"), can make an ordinary scene look dramatic. Rembrandt composed many of his portraits in a similar way. In his *Self-Portrait* of 1659, the light is cast on his face to draw attention to it, leaving much of his body in shadow.

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## Self-Portraits

Rembrandt did not paint many landscapes, but one “landscape” with which he was very familiar was the terrain of his own face. He closely studied his face and made sketches, etchings, and paintings of himself more than a hundred times. In a way, he was his favorite model. He could experiment with various techniques and practice drawing facial expressions that conveyed different feelings, such as fear, worry, melancholy, surprise, or amusement. Painted over the years, his self-portraits show him young and old, dressed in everyday clothes or wearing theatrical costumes and elegant hats. And in some, Rembrandt examines his identity as an artist.

Rembrandt was fifty-three years old when he painted the self-portrait wearing an artist’s cap and a brown painter’s jacket. The light illuminates his head, drawing attention to his deep-set eyes, wrinkled cheeks, and furrowed brow. To create his scruffy gray hair, Rembrandt used the end of his paintbrush handle to scratch through the wet paint to make curls. Light also accents his left shoulder and clasped hands, but most of the painting is in dark shadow. What might he be thinking and feeling?

### Make a self-portrait

**You will need:**

**A mirror**

**Paper**

**Crayons, markers, colored pencils, or paints**

Making a self-portrait is a way of getting to know yourself. First, think about these questions: What makes you who you are? What are your interests? Your dreams? Select clothing that reflects something about you. You might want to include objects in your self-portrait that help describe your personality. Think of a self-portrait as a personal introduction. What do you want to tell people about yourself? How do you want people to remember you?

Next, study yourself in the mirror. What features make you unique? Try out different facial expressions—smile, frown, or laugh—and strike different poses. Do you want to look relaxed, physically active, or deep in thought? Then, try to capture your appearance and character on paper. Like Rembrandt, experiment by creating many different self-portraits. You might even wish to put yourself in a landscape or place that is special to you.

top: Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait*, 1659, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Andrew W. Mellon Collection

middle: Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1637, red chalk, Rembrandt Chronology, no. 7, National Gallery of Art, Rosenwald Collection

bottom: Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait in a Cap, Open-Mouthed*, 1630, etching, White/Boon 1969, no. 320, National Gallery of Art, Rosenwald Collection

