This exhibition charts an astonishing transformation. Spanning the years 1624 to 1634, it traces how a young and unremarkable artist from Leiden became the superstar of 17th-century Amsterdam and one of the greatest artists of all time.

Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn, simply known as Rembrandt, was born in 1606. There was nothing particularly promising about his work when he qualified as a painter around 1624/5. But during the subsequent decade – working in painting, printmaking and drawing – he was relentless in his efforts to improve. By looking over Rembrandt’s shoulder as he learns from his mistakes and as he experiments with new techniques and subjects, we can follow the steps by which he established himself as an extraordinary talent.

To help understand this metamorphosis, works by key figures in Rembrandt’s development are shown in roughly chronological sections. Rembrandt’s self-portraits introduce each themed section.
The old man asleep in this impressive drawing is Rembrandt’s father, Harmen van Rijn. A quick sketch in red and black chalk was made first, possibly in about 1627. Later, probably after his father’s death in April 1630, Rembrandt added the brown washes and his father’s name to turn his initial sketch into a more sombre, memorial portrait.

One of four tiny etchings which were all made between 1630-1631. They were not intended as self-portraits but rather as informal experiments in differing facial expressions. He portrays himself shouting, laughing or with a serious look. Like his other self-portraits from the same period, Rembrandt’s aim was to study light and facial expressions rather than capture an accurate likeness.

A raggedly-dressed man holds out his hand, while apparently talking or shouting. Although looking like an observational study of a beggar, closer inspection reveals that this is another self-portrait by Rembrandt. The same facial expression with its open mouth can be found in his small self-portraits made in the same year.

Copper plates allowed printmakers to create multiple impressions of each print. Copper was expensive so they were often sold or melted after use. Rembrandt owned his own printing press. Extraordinarily, almost 100 of Rembrandt’s copper plates have survived, avidly collected after his death. These plates give a glimpse into his working methods. This printing plate and a print show how Rembrandt tended to focus on small-scale single figures in his early printmaking.
History Painting, 1626. Oil on panel. Museum De Lakenhal, Leiden, on long-term loan from the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands.

It is not known whether this ambitious picture depicts an episode from the Bible, an event from ancient history or a scene from a play. However, Rembrandt included his self-portrait just behind the crowned figure, while placing his friend Jan Lievens deep within the shadows on the left – a blue feather in his cap. The weapons are studio props that can be seen in other works in the exhibition.

Judas Repentant Returning the Pieces of Silver, 1629. Oil on panel, private collection.

One of Christ’s followers betrayed him. Here, kneeling on the ground, Judas begs to return the 30 pieces of silver he had been paid. His remorse was overwhelming and his scalp bleeding where he has torn at his hair. The Temple elders show that they want nothing to do with him.

Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem, 1630. Oil on panel, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

The Old Testament prophet, Jeremiah, sits in downcast meditation beside a bowl of gleaming treasures. Having predicted the destruction of the city and Temple of Jerusalem, which burns in the background, he has rescued these precious artefacts. 24-year-old Rembrandt displays astonishing skill in capturing the subtle fall of light, the textures of each object and the depth of Jeremiah’s despair.


Rembrandt clearly ransacked his dressing-up box to create this self-portrait, possibly with the intention of depicting himself as a biblical ruler. He is wearing a turban adorned with a feather of an exotic bird of paradise and a velvet cloak over a satin robe tied at the waist with a multi-coloured sash. The poodle at his feet was added later and is painted over the artist’s lower legs.
This depiction of an 83-year-old woman is considered by many to be the finest of all Rembrandt’s early portraits. Rembrandt’s years of studying the faces of his parents and numerous old men prepared him for capturing the texture of her aging flesh and her careworn look of introspection. Identified as Aechje Claesdr., she was the mother of a Rotterdam brewer whose portrait Rembrandt also painted in 1634.

A magnificent depiction of resolute, still vigorous old age, this work is a testament to Rembrandt’s ambition. Painted a year after his move to Amsterdam, it displays his ability to suggest an atmosphere in which rich and complex textures gleam in the fall of light. Commonly, but misleadingly, known as ‘The Noble Slav’ the man wears Turkish dress with a large pendant bearing a Turkish crescent.

This flamboyant self-portrait was until recently attributed to one of his pupils. The artist has dressed up in exotic clothing topped with a beret decorated with ostrich feathers. The large scale of this self-portrait marks the moment when the young Rembrandt’s career can be said to come to an end and the mature artist emerges.

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