

Rembrandt in Leiden

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It's a small block of flats in a Leiden side street. Students from the local university live here, some of them Spanish or French to judge by their name-plates. Their bicycles outside have the traditional plastic bags on their saddles to protect them against the Leiden rain.

You wouldn't suspect that Rembrandt van Rijn was born on this spot on July 15 1606 and lived here almost all his first 25 years because, early in the 20th century, in a typical case of Leiden's neglect, his house was torn down. Only a stone from the original house survives, built into the current building, bearing a plaque with the painter's name. For a long time that was all. "His city of birth never did anything with him until now," admits Jetteke Bolten, director of the local art museum De Lakenhal.

This spring Leiden finally built him a monument in the little square facing the flats: a statue of a young man with ruffled collar gazing at a Rembrandt self-portrait. Hidden away in this sleepy town, it may never become a tourist trap and on a sunny morning you can sit under the trees alone with Rembrandt and ponder his origins.

Rembrandt's association with Leiden has been underplayed these last 400 years. Growing up about a mile from Rembrandt's house for a decade, I heard little about him. Art historians long neglected his roots. Yet his years in Leiden were the busiest period in the town's history, complete with Pilgrim Fathers, tulips, plague and religious mania. Leiden shaped him and then he abandoned it to its decay.

Rembrandt's family were millers. His grandfather's mill was burned down by the Spaniards during their siege of Leiden in 1573. But on October 3 1574, the city was saved from hunger by a Dutch fleet, a day still celebrated each year with herring and white bread. As a reward for its courage, Leiden was granted the first university of the northern Netherlands.

The university helped the town boom. Between 1581 and 1622 the population nearly quadrupled to 45,000 people. Leiden was the second city in the Dutch Republic, behind only Amsterdam. Rembrandt's father's mill prospered.

Broadly, there were two kinds of mill in Leiden then, each with contrasting needs: millers of malt, like Rembrandt's father, needed clean water so as not to pollute the beer. But the textile mills dirtied the water. Textile won (although Rembrandt's father remained prosperous) and Flemish refugees fleeing to Leiden from

Spanish rule brought new lighter cloths. Bolten's museum is called Lakenhal, or "cloth hall", after the building's origins.

It's odd revisiting the streets where I grew up. I remember the 't Gerecht café specialising in Belgian beers but not the Leiden Latin School just across the alley, Rembrandt's alma mater. All teaching, even maths, was in Latin and pupils spoke the language among themselves. Rembrandt was the only one of 10 siblings to be prepared for an academic destiny, probably at the local university, where he did in fact enrol at 14. He probably never studied there but he did frequent the university. He may have based his famous "Polish Rider" on a human skeleton, seated on a horse's skeleton, which he drew in the university's anatomy hall.

The Latin School suited Rembrandt's own career plans. Fascinated by the Bible, history and classical literature, he aspired to be a history painter, the highest form of art in the hierarchy prevailing then. "You had to know a lot for that and Rembrandt knew an enormous amount," says Bolten. In later life in Amsterdam he compulsively shopped for historical costumes in which to paint the neighbours he used as models. This helped bankrupt him.

Leiden was then becoming one of Europe's intellectual centres and this had a curious side-effect. Among the university's modern features was not just the anatomy hall but also its Hortus Botanicus (botanical garden). The story of Dutch tulips starts in the 16th century, when the Austrian ambassador to the Turkish court returned home with a tulip bulb. In Vienna he gave it to Carolus Clusius, prefect of the imperial medicinal garden. In 1593 Clusius took a post at Leiden University. In the Hortus he planted western Europe's first tulip bulbs. Tulipmania ensued and today the bulb fields lie just a bike ride outside Leiden.

The eight-year war with Catholic Spain helped turn Rembrandt's Leiden into a Protestant city, which appealed to a certain group of religious dissidents from England. When a descendant of the Pilgrim Fathers, George Herbert Walker Bush, dropped in on Leiden during his presidency, students greeted him with the banner, "Welcome Home, Mr President."

In 1609 the Pilgrims had asked permission to settle in Leiden. But they never got used to the place and, in 1620, the year Rembrandt became the pupil of a local painter, a minority of them sailed to America. Some of their dead are buried in the Pieterskerk church in Leiden, as are Rembrandt's parents and some of his siblings.

Rembrandt lived in Leiden until he was 25. He did briefly study in Amsterdam, which may have saved his life: 9,897 people died of the plague in Leiden in 1624 and 1625, part of which time he was away. But the Black Death aside, the town was a decent environment for a painter. Seventeenth-century visitors often marvelled at the wealth of ordinary Dutch people: here some peasants had gold

teeth. The average Leiden household then owned about eight to 10 paintings, writes the art historian Gerbrand Korevaar. There were about 46 professional artists working in Leiden in 1626. Next door to Rembrandt's first master, Jacob van Swanenburgh, lived Jan Steen, later also a Latin schoolboy.

But Leiden was poorer than Amsterdam and so had fewer clients for fancy historical paintings, or large canvases like the "Nightwatch" Rembrandt later painted in Amsterdam. In the Lakenhal's current exhibition of Rembrandt's etchings, the ones from his Leiden days feature beggars, peasants, a rat catcher and a quacksalver. There wasn't much money in that.

Rembrandt didn't become a great painter in Leiden. His only well-known "Leiden" work is his 1628 self-portrait as a young man with curly hair, which today hangs in Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum. The Rembrandt expert Ernst van de Wetering says his early paintings lack the sophisticated use of light and shadow, the movement and psychological insights for which we know him. It took centuries for some of them to be discovered as Rembrandts. A passing art historian spotted one hanging above the sideboard of the house of an elderly woman in the Dutch town of Nijmegen in 1974, writes Van de Wetering.

But Rembrandt did develop one of his characteristic techniques in Leiden: varying the thickness of paint. Early on, he and the Leiden painter Jan Lievens, with whom he probably shared a studio, "taught themselves to imitate all sorts of materials, from leather and fur to silver and wood, by varying the paint substance and surface", says Van de Wetering. Rough paint could highlight a section of canvas, making it almost tangible. Light would bounce off the roughness and make the paint "sparkle", in Rembrandt's word. Lievens was initially considered the better painter of the two but Van de Wetering says he later abandoned this technique while Rembrandt perfected it.

No young man aspiring to global conquest could stay in Leiden. As Rembrandt grew up, the city's intellectual freedom narrowed. A Calvinist theological dispute split the university: one side, the Precise, argued that man's destiny was entirely predestined even before birth, while the other, the Remonstrants, said not entirely. The persecution of Remonstrants began in the 1630s, when Rembrandt moved to Amsterdam. There was probably a connection. Bolten says he "was drawn to freethinkers and that whole Jewish 'scene' in Amsterdam".

He probably never did a portrait commission in Leiden but as soon as he got to Amsterdam he began a large series of portraits. In Amsterdam he painted a rabbi and a Remonstrant minister. The world was in Amsterdam, not in Leiden.

Thanks to the Dutch East India Company, Amsterdam was booming. On warm days the scent of Asian spices hung over town. The Amsterdam we know, the city of beautiful canal streets, was largely built in Rembrandt's time. He lived in the Jewish quarter. In fact, in the same week in July 1656 that the philosopher

Baruch Spinoza was expelled from the local synagogue, Rembrandt's possessions were inventoried after his bankruptcy.

Rembrandt signed his early paintings "R[embrandt] H[armenszoon] L[eijdensis] van Rijn" but in 1632 he began signing with his first name, dropping the reference to Leiden. It is unlikely that he ever painted his home town or wrote anything about it. Bolten says: "It didn't matter to him. He was an ambitious painter who was going to conquer the world because he was the best."

Leiden was left with its textiles and university. Yet its role in history was not quite over. In 1917, the avant-garde arts magazine De Stijl was founded in a house literally around the corner from Rembrandt's place of birth: you turn right on his alley, walk perhaps 200 yards along a quiet stretch of canal and there you are. Theo van Doesburg and other painters, architects, sculptors and writers were launching a movement of complete abstraction: no reference to visual reality, and use only of straight lines and primary colours. De Stijl's most famous exponent became Piet Mondrian. In coming centuries Leiden may get round to marking Van Doesburg's house with a plaque.

While Van Doesburg was founding his magazine, about 100 miles south in Flanders, armies were massacring each other. But Leiden by then had got used to being a refuge from history. That almost tempted Albert Einstein to settle there permanently. In 1920 Einstein began visiting Leiden as a "special professor" for several weeks a year. He and the Leiden physicist Paul Ehrenfest would play music together - Einstein on the violin, Ehrenfest on the piano - and he enjoyed the nearby windy seaside.

He also liked Heike Kamerlingh Onnes, who had won the physics Nobel prize in 1913 for discovering superconductivity, the almost complete lack of electrical resistance in certain materials when cooled to a temperature near absolute zero. It being Leiden, Einstein was painted by Kamerlingh Onnes's gifted nephew Harm, an early member of De Stijl before Van Doesburg kicked him out.

In 1925 Ehrenfest invited the second most important physicist of the century, the Dane Niels Bohr, to Leiden to meet Einstein. They stayed in adjoining bedrooms on the top floor of Ehrenfest's house on the Witterozenstraat, where they moved quantum mechanics forward through daily arguments.

When the Nazis took power in Germany in 1933, Einstein considered moving to Leiden. The story is that a German woman in Leiden told him: "If you move here, you'll have a very pleasant life. Nobody will ever hear of you again." So he went to Princeton. That saved his life. In 1940 the Germans invaded. Jewish professors were expelled from the university. On the morning of November 26 1940 the dour law professor Rudolph Cleveringa said farewell to his wife and walked to the faculty building where his mentor, the brilliant Jewish law professor E.M. Meijers had been scheduled to lecture.

Before a packed hall, Cleveringa eulogised Meijers. He finished by urging his listeners to "always keep in our thoughts and our hearts the image of the figure and the personality of whom we cannot cease to believe that he ought to be standing here, and if God wills it, will return here."

There was silence, then a lengthy ovation. A student began singing the national anthem. The audience took it up, many people crying. Cleveringa handed his text of his speech to a colleague who had requested it and walked home. That night students sat up typing endless copies of Cleveringa's speech, which were sent around the country. So the Dutch Resistance began (according to the popular Leiden version). Leiden students went on strike and in 1942 the Germans closed the university. Cleveringa spent eight months in jail. He and Meijers survived the war.

Discussing Cleveringa in the 1980s with a friend of my mother's, a Leiden nurse, I wondered whether he was still alive. "He's dead," she said. "Are you sure?" I asked peskily. "He died in my arms," she said. During my interview with Bolten, Leiden's air raid sirens began to blare: they are always tested on the first Monday of the month, a blast from the past.

The war was Leiden's last tangle with history. The town's gradual decline continued. In 1976, the year I arrived in Leiden, its last textile factory closed. The Netherlands acquired many new universities - a study by the Dutch education ministry in 2004 ranked Leiden's as the worst in the country, not helped by drunken frat-boys aping 19th-century aristocrats. Meanwhile Leiden neglected Rembrandt. Bolten explains that the town's uneasy mix of academics and poor industrial proletariat, "town and gown", prevented a unified Leiden civic pride from arising. This year, unprecedentedly, the Lakenhal has three Rembrandt exhibitions. It's the first time that Leiden has given him so much attention.

The canal town is ceasing to be an utter backwater and that may be a shame. Because Leiden was neglected, developers were never tempted to mess it up. Today its perfectly preserved medieval and Renaissance city centre is almost free of tourists. Einstein called it "that delightful spot of ground on this arid earth".

If Rembrandt were to return home for his birthday, he would recognise many cobblestoned alleyways, he would find his way around. He could sit on a café terrace in the sun outside the Pieterskerk having a coffee, and see signs only in Dutch, not in English as all over Amsterdam. But after a few minutes he would remember why he left town.

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