Dutch Masters from the Hermitage

Background story for press

For the first time ever, the Hermitage Amsterdam is to hold an exhibition devoted to one of the crowning glories of the State Hermitage museum in St Petersburg: its collection of seventeenth-century Dutch paintings. Dutch Masters from the Hermitage. Treasures of the Tsars opens on 7 October 2017 and will be the 15th exhibition held by the Hermitage Amsterdam since it opened in its Amstel-side home in 2009.

Starring in the exhibition will be a representative selection of 63 works by 50 different artists. Virtually all of the paintings are normally on permanent display at the St Petersburg museum and practically all the great Dutch masters are included in the selection. The State Hermitage's collection of Dutch Golden Age paintings comprises 1500 works, making it the biggest anywhere outside the Netherlands. No other collection in the world includes so many Rembrandts. The exhibition will be arranged variably, with the paintings grouped sometimes by movement and sometimes thematically, but always in appropriate ensembles. The show will also explore the origins and development of the collection, paying particular attention to the way some individual masterpieces found their way to Russia. At its heart, portraits by Rembrandt and the gifted painters in his immediate circle play a prominent role.

The glory days of Dutch Golden Age painting between 1650 and 1670 will be lavishly represented by 37 works, including no fewer than six Rembrandts. In addition to world-famous masterpieces like Rembrandt's Flora and Young Woman with Earrings, one of Frans Hals's renowned male portraits, and Bartholomeus van der Helst's Nieuwmarkt in Amsterdam, the exhibition will include works by lesser-known but still sensational painters like Willem Drost, Pieter Janssens Elinga, Arent de Gelder and Emanuel de Witte. The vast majority (57) of the works on show will come from the permanent display of Dutch painting at the State Hermitage and will be exhibited in their original period frames (49). Most of them have not been seen in the Netherlands since they were acquired for the Russian collection.

From left to right:

Rembrandt van Rijn, Flora, 1634; Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669), Portrait of a Man, 1661; Gabriel Metsu, Breakfast, c. 1659-62; Willem Kalf, Stillie with dessert, c. 1653; Dirck van Baburen, Concert, 1623

© State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Dutch Golden Age painting
The great wealth acquired by the Northern Netherlands in the seventeenth century triggered a huge boom in painting. Countless artists created peerless masterpieces, which now occupy pride of place in museums worldwide and in St Petersburg's State Hermitage museum in particular. History paintings, landscapes, portraits, still lifes, scenes of everyday
life, seascapes and church interiors were all depicted in Golden Age studios with an almost inconceivable display of imagination.

Some outstanding painters, like Rembrandt, mastered a variety of genres but many artists concentrated on just one kind of painting. This intense specialization is a distinctive feature of seventeenth-century Dutch painting. Among the genres represented in this exhibition will be biblical scenes by Lastman and Wtewael, portraits by Rembrandt, Hals, Flinck and others, still lifes by Bol, Heda and Kalf, genre paintings by Dou, Steen and Ter Borch, landscapes by Ruisdael and Van Goyen, and town views by Berckheyde and Van der Heyden.

**Mass production**

Dutch Golden Age painting displays a unique and distinctive creativity and individuality. There was an unceasing flow of talented new artists with their own personal styles. And productivity was enormous. Time and again, foreign visitors to the Northern Netherlands expressed astonishment at the profusion of paintings in ordinary homes. Art was not the preserve of the fabulously rich. Even the poor could find the few coppers needed to buy a print, while the more affluent crowded their walls with paintings, even hanging them in the kitchen. Several million paintings are thought to have been produced during the period. In the eighteenth century, they were to become more and more popular outside the Northern Netherlands, particularly among the extremely wealthy.

**An eye for Dutch Masters**

The second half of the eighteenth century brought a growing demand for Dutch Golden Age paintings from collectors throughout Europe. The market was vast, especially in Russia. This extraordinary Russian fondness for Dutch art was, of course, connected with the earlier tastes of Peter the Great, but also with the particular iconography of the paintings. They were regarded as realistic depictions of the everyday world, specifically of domestic themes. This realism, in particular in the depiction of light and shade, made them extremely popular. The fact that virtually all genres were represented also helped.

As collector Alexander Stroganov put it in his 1807 catalogue, ‘The Dutch school is in some respects superior to others. It aims to be as faithful to nature as possible. […] The paintings are extremely detailed. The Dutch also have an excellent mastery of the art of colour shading and colour contrasts: this enables them to paint light itself, if I can put it that way.’

**Two centuries of collecting**

When Tsar Peter the Great travelled to the Dutch Republic to learn from Western science and culture, little was known in Russia about Dutch artists, let alone about the paintings they were producing. Peter was one of the first Russians to show any interest in the art of the Low Countries. He formed a modest collection, with Rembrandt’s *David and Jonathan* as one of his first major purchases in 1716. This was Russia’s first Rembrandt. The painting was previously on show at the Hermitage Amsterdam as part of the 2013 exhibition *Peter the Great. An Inspired Tsar*.

Initially, it was unusual to buy art from the Low Countries. Most collectors bowed to the authority of the French Académie royale de Peinture et de Sculpture and, because the work of the Dutch Masters did not correspond exactly to the Academy’s strict classical ideals, it tended to be ignored. Italian and French artists were regarded as superior. However, this attitude began to change when the Academy’s classical ideals came under increasing fire from its own members. The shift in opinion led to a growing interest in and
respect for the Masters of the Low Countries. The result was far greater investment in Dutch art.

When Catherine the Great became Empress of Russia in 1762, she was keen to project an image of herself as an enlightened monarch. To do this, she had the ambitious idea of creating a gigantic art gallery alongside the Winter Palace in St Petersburg and, between 1763 and 1789, used agents to make numerous art purchases in Western Europe. Where the Dutch Masters were concerned, Catherine could look for inspiration to the imperial residences in and around St Petersburg. These palaces (Peterhof, Tsarskoe Selo and Oranienbaum) housed works bought in the Netherlands for Tsar Peter the Great (in 1716–17) and in Bohemia for his daughter, Empress Elizabeth (in 1745).

Catherine’s first mass acquisition was the collection of Johann Ernst Gotzkowsky, purchased in Berlin in 1764. It comprised over 300 works by artists including Rembrandt and Goltzius. On show in the forthcoming exhibition, Dirck van Baburen’s Concert is a work from this collection. Right from the start, Catherine paid far more than market price for her purchases. In 1768 she bought the collection of Heinrich von Brühl, Prime Minister of Saxony, which comprised 500 paintings and included works by Ruisdael, Dou, Metsu and Rembrandt. The latter’s Portrait of a Scholar and Portrait of an Old Man in Red will be on show in Amsterdam.

Since Catherine’s agents (frequently diplomats) were spread throughout Western Europe and were given large budgets, the Russian Empress was soon seen as a redoubtable player in the art market. No collector was safe from her ‘greed’ (as she herself called it). One of her most energetic agents was Dmitry Golitsyn, ambassador first in Paris and later in The Hague. He made many purchases on her behalf, including works by De Lairesse, Hondecoeter and Rembrandt (Portrait of Baertje Martens and – Catherine’s personal favourite – Return of the Prodigal Son). Another notable purchase was Gerard Dou’s painting Sick Woman at the Doctor’s, for which Catherine paid the fabulous sum of 19,153 French livres – equivalent to the total earnings of a contemporary Dutch labourer over a 26-year period.

Catherine’s ascendancy on the Western European art market was confirmed when the collection of Louis-Antoine Crozat, baron de Thiers, came up for auction. Originally, the collection was to be sold off piecemeal. Denis Diderot – one of Catherine’s art buyers as well as a famous Enlightenment philosopher – prevented this by offering the owners a vast sum for the collection in its entirety. Among the many masterpieces it contained were Rembrandt’s Danae, The Holy Family and Portrait of an Old Man with a Stick – all snatched by the Russian Empress from under the very noses of art-loving Europe.

From 1769, when Golitsyn moved to The Hague, the Netherlands became a major source of acquisitions to satisfy Catherine’s hunger for art. Golitsyn made major purchases there, including Nicolaas Berchem’s Rape of Europa, Jacob Duck’s Soldier’s Rest, Domenicus van Tol’s The Lacemaker, as well as works by Jan van Goyen, Verschuuring and many others.

One particular purchase made in the Netherlands resulted in a painful loss to the country’s cultural heritage. Following the auction of the collection of Gerrit Braamcamp (an event for which some 20,000 people were thronged in front of the auction house), the merchant ship Vrouw Maria set sail for St Petersburg carrying 27 paintings acquired by Catherine. The vessel foundered off the coast of Finland. Among the paintings lost in the shipwreck were Paulus Potter’s Large Herd of Oxen and Gerard Dou’s Triptych with Allegory of Art Education. The loss was financial as well as cultural: Catherine had lashed out around 14,000 guilders for the latter painting alone. This does not mean, however, that the State Hermitage collection now contains no works from the Braamcamp collection.
Nicolaes Berchem's *The Annunciation to the Shepherds* is among the paintings that later found its way into the collection from that source. That painting will also be on show in *Dutch Masters from the Hermitage*.

Catherine’s last mass art purchases were the collections of Sir Robert Walpole in 1779 and of Sylvain Raphaelé, comte de Baudouin in 1780. The first comprised mainly Flemish and Italian paintings, although it also included a Rembrandt (*Abraham’s Sacrifice*). The second was composed chiefly of works from the Northern Netherlands, including Rembrandt’s *Young Woman with Earrings* – one of the stars of the forthcoming exhibition.

Catherine’s successors – Paul I, Alexander I and Nicholas I – pursued less ambitious acquisitions policies. Paul bought fewer works and banished the more unseemly paintings to the depot, but ordered a thorough inventory of the collection. Alexander likewise made significantly fewer purchases than Catherine. A striking exception, however, was his purchase of paintings from the collection of Joséphine de Beauharnais following his defeat of her husband, Napoleon. They included a considerable number of Dutch (and other) Masters. For his part, Nicholas made noteworthy purchases from the collection of the King Willem II in 1850. The Dutch King’s widow, Anna Paulowna was Tsar Nicholas’s sister and had a major hand in the sale. Among the items purchased was Bartholomeus van der Helst’s *Family Portrait*. By Nicholas’s time it was becoming increasingly common to open art collections to the public. This development eventually prompted the building of the New Hermitage, complete with special exhibition areas for the Rembrandts and other paintings from the Low Countries.

A number of major private collectors in Russia also owned Dutch Masters. For example, Alexander Stroganov (1733–1811) possessed 62 paintings from the Northern and Southern Netherlands, all of which eventually ended up in the Hermitage. It was from him that Catherine bought Van der Helst’s *Nieuwmarkt in Amsterdam*, one of his favourites. The collection of Pyotr Semyonov-Tyan-Shansky (1827–1914) was especially important. It became part of the Hermitage collection in 1914 and contained no fewer than 700 paintings, most of them Dutch. Works from that collection on show in the exhibition will include paintings by Aldewerelt, Kalf, Lastman and Stom.

**Influence on Russian art**

Needless to say, the enormous Russian demand for Dutch paintings led to a Dutch influence on Russian art. Right back to the time of Peter the Great’s visit to the Netherlands, Russian painters drew inspiration from the Dutch Masters, but there was also widespread copying and imitation. Even Ilya Repin (1844–1930, ‘the Russian Rembrandt’) began his career by copying works in the Hermitage collection, such as Rembrandt’s *Portrait of an Old Woman*.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there was a growing fashion for the serial reproduction of paintings in prints and on textiles and porcelain. The Dutch Masters were particularly popular subjects. During the reign of Nicholas I (1825–55), vases adorned with copies of (often Dutch) paintings were manufactured on a large scale in St Petersburg. While all the major porcelain factories in Western Europe participated in this craze, St Petersburg was a particularly prominent player. This was especially due to the massive size of its products: vases as much as a metre and a half high, designed to embellish the interiors of palaces. Scenes of everyday life, landscapes, portraits, flower paintings and battlefield scenes were all popular. The task of reproducing a painting involved not just a specialist copier, but also a sculptor and a decorator or ornamentalist. On average, the work took between two and six months. Sometimes the paintings were taken to the porcelain factory, but usually they were copied in a dedicated space within the Hermitage itself: the porcelain pavilion. As a rule, the first step was to copy the painting and this copy was then transferred to porcelain.
The exhibition will include vases adorned with hand-painted copies of works like Paulus Potter’s *Punishment of a Hunter*, Jan Steen’s *Tric-Trac Players* and Jacob van Ruisdael’s *Marsh in a Forest*.

Collection after 1917, (briefly) coming full circle
The First World War and the October Revolution of 1917 put an end to the development of the Hermitage. The decades after 1917 were the darkest period in its history. It was hard to prevent the disintegration of the collection. At the same time, large numbers of new works were arriving, often without attribution, from private collections that had been nationalized. The result was a chaotic expansion of the collection.

In 1928, the cash-strapped Soviet regime began to offer works from the Hermitage for sale in the West. Paintings by Rembrandt, Frans Hals, Terborch, Metsu, Ruisdael and Bloemaert were lost to the collection. Fortunately the global economic crisis of 1929–33 prevented many works offered for sale from finding buyers. It was during this period, however, that the Mauritshuis bought Thomas de Keyser’s *Portrait of Loef Vredericx* (1626), once acquired by Tsar Paul I and now generously loaned to us for this exhibition – thus (briefly) coming full circle.

Restorations
Many of the paintings have been restored or cleaned in readiness for their trip to Amsterdam. A number have been placed in new frames, donated by the Friends of the Hermitage. The Friends had previously funded a new roof for the Tent-Roofed Hall in St Petersburg, where many Dutch Masters are normally on display. This was inaugurated by Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands during a festive ceremony in 2001. *Nieuwmarkt in Amsterdam*, the Van der Helst townscape mentioned in this briefing, was restored in 2016 thanks to a contribution from Heineken Russia.

Golden Age at the Hermitage Amsterdam
For almost eight months, the Hermitage Amsterdam will be the go-to place for anyone interested in the Dutch Golden Age. In addition to *Dutch Masters from the Hermitage*, visitors will be able to see the permanent *Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age* exhibit and the seventeenth-century building itself. Completed in 1683, it was originally designed as a home for elderly women. Various rooms from that period will be on view as part of a historical tour of the museum that will include the meeting room used by the female governors of the institution, the ‘Church Hall’ or chapel, and the original kitchen. The tour can be completed by a visit to *The Wonder of Amsterdam*, a new multimedia attraction about the early development of the city that is due to open on 24 August 2017.