

Jacquelyn N. Coutré, with Piet Bakker, Janet M. Brooke, and
Stephanie S. Dickey, *Leiden circa 1630: Rembrandt Emerges*,
Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 2019, 359 pp., colour
illus., \$30.00 (paper) ISBN 9781553394198

Nicole Elizabeth Cook

Volume 46, Number 1, 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078073ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078073ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des
universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Cook, N. E. (2021). Review of [Jacquelyn N. Coutré, with Piet Bakker, Janet M. Brooke, and Stephanie S. Dickey, *Leiden circa 1630: Rembrandt Emerges*, Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 2019, 359 pp., colour illus., \$30.00 (paper) ISBN 9781553394198]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 46(1), 112–113. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078073ar>

Jacquelyn N. Coutré, with Piet Bakker, Janet M. Brooke, and Stephanie S. Dickey

Leiden circa 1630: Rembrandt Emerges

Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 2019

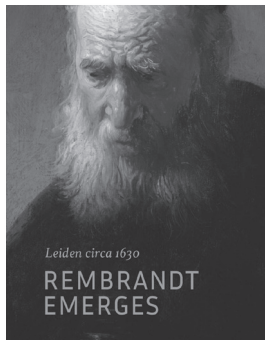
359 pp. colour illus.

\$30.00 (paper) ISBN 9781553394198

Nicole Elizabeth Cook

2019 was the 350th anniversary of Rembrandt van Rijn's death in 1669. Known to specialists and aficionados as "Rembrandt Years" (*Rembrandt-jaaren*), major anniversaries of the Dutch artist's birth and death dates have become causes for scholarly and curatorial celebrations. For 2019, the Rijksmuseum showed *All the Rembrandts of the Rijksmuseum* and collaborated with Madrid's Museo del Prado for the much-anticipated *Rembrandt–Velázquez*. Dozens of other museums, including Rembrandt House Museum in Amsterdam, the Mauritshuis in The Hague, and the Lakenhal in Rembrandt's birthplace of Leiden marked the anniversary with new exhibitions, installations, and programs. In Canada, The Agnes Etherington Art Centre contributed *Leiden circa 1630: Rembrandt emerges*, curated by Dr. Jacquelyn N. Coutré, then Bader Curator and Researcher of European Art (she is now a curator at the Art Institute of Chicago).

The exhibition catalogue is, welcomingly, more of a portrait of a city and an artistic community than it is a portrait of a young artist in the Romanticized sense. Dropping in on Rembrandt, his close colleague Jan Lievens (1607–1674), and their peers in Leiden ca. 1630 feels like finding a long-lost, behind-the-scenes documentary about a famous band before they hit their stride, when they were still experimental, hungry for recognition, and, vitally, mutually competitive with and reliant on one another.



Coutré beautifully introduces this concept in her essay "Rembrandus Hermanni Leydensis: Rembrandt, son of Harmen, of Leiden." Coutré's erudite yet accessible writing draws readers into Leiden's atmosphere of learning, commerce, and art. She structures her essay around several salient questions, summarized in her final point: "What, in fact, did Rembrandt's Leiden look like around 1630, and how did it shape his artistic personality into that of an incredible artistic talent" (14). Coutré provides fascinating discussions of both Leiden's intellectual atmosphere and general "bookishness" and its mercantile position as a centre of the textile industry. With regard to the burgeoning textile industry, she zeros in on the variety of clothes that Rembrandt featured in his prints and paintings. While his peers focused on colour and pattern, Rembrandt picked up on the weight and physicality of fabrics, leading to paintings wherein he depicted "bodies veritably painted as clothes" (25). Coutré concludes her essay by positioning Rembrandt as "the centre of a constellation of artists with whom he had multifaceted relationships," ranging from peers to students and protégées (27). Her curatorial approach to Rembrandt celebrates his exceptionalism while also positioning him within a rich artistic tapestry, which provides a valuable entry point for Rembrandt scholars as well as non-specialists.

Stephanie Dickey, Professor of Art History at Queen's University,

picks up on Rembrandt's role as part of a larger artistic network. In "Printmaking in Leiden circa 1930: Rembrandt, Lievens, and Van Vliet," she presents a vibrant picture of these three artists' printmaking exchanges as a small but significant subcommunity within the larger atmosphere of artistic experimentation and competition in the city. She focuses the opening pages of her essay on the importance of trial and error in any young artist's training, and the concept of "learning by doing" that is so present in the early work of Rembrandt, Lievens, and their immediate peers (40). Dickey grounds her essay in perceptive and coherent discussion of the practicalities of printmaking and its materials and techniques and how this manifests not only in the artists' prints, but also in other media. She illuminates Lievens' more dexterous etching abilities when compared with Rembrandt, for instance his more expert building up of dense layers of lines to imitate chiaroscuro effects. She also highlights Rembrandt's and Lievens' joint use of the practice of using a butt end of a paintbrush to scratch into wet old paint impasto to create richly textured definition in details such as strands of hair. Dickey suggests that "one cannot help noticing a parallel to the practice of scratching into a waxy ground with a printmaker's needle" (55). Leiden's role as an intellectual centre for medicine and education features in Dickey's essay as well. In describing Rembrandt, Van Vliet, and Gerrit Dou's mutual interests in surgical and medical scenes of patients, often under extreme duress, Dickey writes that this cannot be coincidental, but "[r]ather it testifies to close interactions among these artists in Leiden, and to the shared interest in observation and vivid depiction of human experience" (48).

Piet Bakker's essay, "Rembrandt and the Emergence of the Leiden Art Market," synthesizes archival and statistical data with art historical

writing in the deft manner that has come to define his writing. Bakker orients his essay around the history of Leiden originally written by city burgomaster Jan Jansz. Orlers (1570–1646) in 1614 and then released as an expanded second edition in 1641. Significantly, he points out the lack of an artists' guild in Leiden during this period. It was the only city of comparable size without a Guild of Saint Luke and Bakker pieces together both the likely reasons for the lack of a guild and the resulting effects. He convincingly posits that the small number of artists in Leiden contributed to their failure to push local politicians to form a guild and, as a result, fewer artists relocated to Leiden, further exacerbating the problem. Bakker further enhances our understanding of Leiden's artistic circles by introducing evidence for the kinds of artworks collected by residents, those by local artists and those imported from other cities. He notes that evidence from preserved inventories, though limited, indicates that Lievens achieved better access to the elite art patrons of Leiden than did Rembrandt (82). Yet he emphasizes that both young artists quickly outgrew Leiden and set their sights on larger cities and more prominent buyers. Bakker closes by looking ahead a few years to the career of Rembrandt student Gerrit Dou and his followers, who were known for their precise and highly detailed style of painting on small, jewel-like panels, very beautiful and, notably, very unlike the work of Rembrandt and Lievens during their Leiden heyday.

Rounding out the catalogue essays, Janet M. Brooke considers the collecting of Rembrandt in Canada, noting that, while the collecting of Rembrandt in the United States' Gilded Age has been much parsed, the concurrent interests of Canadian collectors during the same era has not been examined in any depth. She traces appearances of Rembrandt works in the

Canadian art collecting era from early instances in the 1860s, to important exhibitions and museum acquisitions of the early 1900s, to the flourishing of forgeries that resulted from the Rembrandt fervor during the 20th century, and finally to the immediate history of collector-chemist Dr. Alfred Bader, who passed away in 2018. Bader's singular and significant contributions to the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, all in devotion to the study of Rembrandt and Baroque art, form another important context for the exhibition. The Etherington boasts an art collection and funding structure that many universities, and museums for that matter, would covet, yet this also leads to broader questions about the study and exhibition of Rembrandt now.

Reviewing this exhibition catalogue is impossible to do without contemplating the events of the art world, and the world, from 2019 to our current moment in early 2021. In a moment when the Amsterdam History Museum is very publicly abandoning use of the problematic term "The Golden Age"¹ and the Rijksmuseum is planning their first-ever exhibition to focus on slavery in the seventeenth century,² one must ask: what will Rembrandt studies look like in the future? As Coutré herself asked in an October 2019 article, "with the 2006 *Rembrandt-jaar* still fresh in the memories of many, one may wonder, why are we celebrating Rembrandt again? What appeal does this European male artist have for us in 2019?"³ This question has been asked before and will be asked again, but it has gained new urgency in the wake of the resurgent Black Lives Matter movement of 2020, along with the devastating effects of the global Covid-19 pandemic on cultural institutions. Museums will not be the same, nor should they be. Rembrandt occupies such a privileged place in museums, the art market, and the popular imagination that his future presence in museums will act, in many ways, as a signpost for

the greater challenge of grappling with the traditional advantaging of Renaissance and Baroque art, the "old masters," in museum spaces.

Commendably, some of this book's most salient scholarship and most enjoyable passages for readers come not from centring Rembrandt's fame, but from an overarching focus on the nature of artists and artmaking. The fluid intermingling of paintings, prints, and drawings enhances the essays and the catalogue entries. While all of the authors refer to the highly Romanticized view of Rembrandt as singular genius that emerged in the nineteenth century, they each present a much less lonely and so all the more interesting take on the artist in his earlier years. The raw artistic energy of a group of young, ambitious, competitive friends comes to life. The book is generously illustrated in colour and the essays and catalogue entries are available in French translation at the end of the volume, with the entries helpfully including thumbnail images. As we contemplate the future of Rembrandt studies—and the broader field of Dutch seventeenth-century art history—the type of scholarship demonstrated in *Leiden circa 1630*, with its focus on artists not as singular "masters," but as interconnected workers, thinkers, and makers, will offer much to contemplate for Rembrandt specialists and enthusiasts alike. ¶

Nicole Elizabeth Cook, PhD, is Program Manager for Graduate Academic Partnerships at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.
—nicole.cook@philamuseum.org

1. Tom van der Molen, "The Problem of 'the Golden Age,'" *CODART features*, Curator's Project, November 2019, <https://www.codart.nl/feature/curators-project/the-problem-of-the-golden-age>.

2. "Slavery," Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 2021, <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/whats-on/exhibitions/slavery>.

3. Jacquelyn N. Coutré, "It's the year of Rembrandt again, to the delight of museum audiences," *The Conversation*, October 6, 2019, <https://theconversation.com/its-the-year-of-rembrandt-again-to-the-delight-of-museum-audiences-122583>.