

Audio Guide Transcript

***Dutch Painting in the Age of Rembrandt
from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston***

October 20, 2019–January 12, 2020
Main Exhibition Galleries

SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM

Introduction Gallery: *Director's Welcome*

Speaker: Brent Benjamin
Barbara B. Taylor Director
Saint Louis Art Museum

Hello, I'm Brent Benjamin, Barbara B. Taylor Director of the Saint Louis Art Museum.

Welcome to this exhibition and audio guide. The exhibition is drawn from two exceptional recent gifts of Dutch paintings to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

Currently on loan to the Saint Louis Art Museum, these works of art invite visitors to explore and learn about life in the thriving 17th-century Dutch Republic. Painters like Rembrandt van Rijn excelled in portraits of civic leaders, while Jacob van Ruisdael depicted the familiar windmills and rural scenes found throughout the distinctive Dutch landscape. Other artists reflected the republic's developments in global trade, religion, and everyday life.

This audio guide highlights eight paintings and offers expert commentary by Elizabeth Wyckoff, curator of prints, drawings, and photographs; Judith W. Mann, curator of European art to 1800; and Heather Hughes, senior research assistant, all at the Saint Louis Art Museum. Each featured work can be located in the exhibition galleries by following the floorplan on this webpage or by identifying an audio icon on the object label. A map of the Dutch Republic is also available on this audio page to help you familiarize yourself with the region's geography and key cities. I hope you enjoy this audio guide and your visit to *Dutch Painting in the Age of Rembrandt from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*.

STOP 1

People of the Dutch Republic: *Portrait of Aeltje Uylenburgh*

Speaker: Elizabeth Wyckoff
Curator of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs
Saint Louis Art Museum

Hello, I'm Elizabeth Wyckoff, curator of prints, drawings, and photographs at the Saint Louis Art Museum. Sixty-two-year-old Aeltje Uylenburgh posed for this portrait in 1632, soon after Rembrandt moved to Amsterdam from his native town of Leiden.

Amsterdam's population had more than doubled in the previous 30 years—it was the young Dutch Republic's economic and cultural powerhouse. Rembrandt was at that very moment poised to become the city's most sought-after painter. The same year, he was commissioned to paint a group portrait of prominent members of the Amsterdam surgeon's guild, the now-famed *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp*, which is now in the Mauritshuis collection in The Hague.

Aeltje, however, was a more familiar model: she was the first cousin of Rembrandt's future wife, Saskia, whom he married in 1635. Both women were also cousins of his associate the art dealer Hendrick Uylenburgh, whom he lived and worked with when he first moved to Amsterdam. This insightful and sensitive portrait of Saskia's recognizably older cousin can be seen as emblematic of Rembrandt's early career. Portrait commissions fed his income and established his fame. The portrait also reveals some of the complexity of society in the Dutch Republic, which had many layers, including in religion.

So Rembrandt had a business arrangement with Hendrick Uylenburgh, a Mennonite art

dealer with roots in Friesland in the north of the Netherlands—but he had in fact lived most of his life in Poland in religious exile. No family history is straightforward, and Aeltje represented the Calvinist branch of the Uylenburghs. Her husband, Johannes Cornelis Sylvius, was the long-serving preacher of Amsterdam’s Oude Kerk (or Old Church). Rembrandt painted Sylvius’s portrait as well. The painting no longer survives, but two etchings of Sylvius do.

Although we now recognize whom this portrait represents, you might be surprised to learn that it was only around 20 years ago, when this painting came to auction, that a Dutch art historian managed to connect Aeltje Uylenburgh’s name with it. It had been lost from memory since at least the early 19th century, when it was identified as “an interesting old Lady, said to be the painter’s mother.” This is the norm rather than an exception in the history of portraits.

Nonetheless, Rembrandt managed to convey a sense of the type of person she was, not just what she looked like. Before you move on, pause for a moment to examine just how he manipulated oil paint with his brush to depict the fall of light on Aeltje’s face and costume. Notice the little abstract touch of white on the tip of her nose or the bright white line that captures her starched cap’s curve. Rembrandt’s way of painting was as distinctive as what he painted, and that is evident even in this early, deceptively straightforward portrait.

STOP 2 **Science, Travel, and Trade: *A Landscape in Brazil***

Speaker: Heather Hughes
Senior Research Assistant
Saint Louis Art Museum

Hello, my name is Heather Hughes, and I'm the senior research assistant and study room manager in prints, drawings, and photographs at the Saint Louis Art Museum. The landscape you see here is unlike any other in this exhibition. The bright blue skies and tropical vegetation tell us immediately: we are not looking at a Dutch landscape. Instead, we are looking at a Dutch colony in Brazil as painted by the Dutch artist Frans Post. This is an idealized depiction of the Brazilian town of Olinda, where we can still see traces of the earlier Portuguese colony. The Dutch colony of New Holland was established in 1630, when the Dutch West India Company successfully captured the territory from the Portuguese. In the foreground, the ruins of the earlier settlement are being slowly reclaimed by nature, but in the distance, a Catholic church remains standing. The church points to the religious practices of the Portuguese, some of whom remained in the colony even after the Dutch took over.

During the 17th century Brazil was the center of sugar production. From there, sugar was shipped back to Europe, where this valuable commodity was in extremely high demand. By replacing the Portuguese colonists in Brazil, the Dutch West India Company gained control of all components of the sugar trade: growing it, refining it, transporting it, and selling it. To build this lucrative industry, the Portuguese took over land once occupied by indigenous Brazilians. They relied on a labor force composed almost entirely of enslaved Africans. The Dutch continued this system, even transporting an

additional 31,000 enslaved workers from western and central Africa. In the painting here, we only see indirect signs of this history: resting along the side of a rustic path are three African individuals engaged in a lively conversation; farther down the path are several figures wearing the white gauzy outfits typically associated with the indigenous Tupi people.

Frans Post was invited to Brazil by Count Johan Maurits of Nassau-Siegen, the governor of Dutch Brazil. Johan Maurits invited several artists and naturalists to the colony to create visual and scientific studies that would encourage people to invest in the colony or even settle there. Like his peers, Post was especially attentive to the unique plants and animals in Brazil. For example, the right side of the painting is anchored by a papaya tree, which is native to Central and southern America. Similarly, a small hummingbird flutters near the base of the tree trunk. These colorful local details were of great interest to the people who purchased Frans Post's paintings. His Brazilian landscapes were so popular that collectors continued to commission them years after the Dutch lost the colony to the Portuguese in 1654. The painting here was completed in 1663.

STOP 3

Science, Travel, and Trade: *Still Life with Flowers*

Speaker: Heather Hughes
Senior Research Assistant
Saint Louis Art Museum

This dramatically lit vase of flowers displays the colorful splendor of Mother Nature. During the Dutch golden age, floral still lifes were immensely popular among collectors. Rachel Ruysch was celebrated for her extremely lifelike and carefully composed flower paintings. While many still life painters selected specific blooms for their symbolic meanings, Ruysch selected a wide variety of flowers, showing off the diversity of the natural world.

At the top of the bouquet, Ruysch gave pride of place to the tulip, which is shown here in three varieties: white with red stripes, yellow with red stripes, and pink. Over the centuries, tulips have become associated with Dutch culture, but the tulip is not actually native to the Netherlands. In the 16th century the Flemish diplomat to the Ottoman Empire brought tulip bulbs back to Europe from Istanbul. He gave some of these bulbs to Carolus Clusius, a botanist working in the Dutch Republic. This beautiful flower soon captivated the nation. Wealthy citizens paid huge sums of money to purchase bulbs for their gardens, and tulip investors drove up prices so high that eventually the tulip market crashed, leaving many in financial ruin.

As Ruysch's painting shows, tulips weren't the only flowers that appealed to Dutch collectors. Moving downward, we see a double narcissus, a double anemone, white convolvulus, a blue gentian, and roses in yellow, white, pink, and red. On the lower

right, we have two poppies and a branch of honeysuckle, and on the lower left, a sprig of apple blossom as well as a white butterfly. At the very bottom, the eye is drawn to a marigold, whose curved, broken stem echoes the shape of the glass vase.

Despite Ruysch's skillful rendering of each petal, stem, and leaf, the bouquet we see here is an artful construction, borne out of the artist's imagination. A bouquet such as this could not have actually existed, since these flowers bloom in different seasons. Ruysch likely made drawings of the individual flowers shown here, but then carefully designed her ideal bouquet. She created visual harmony by selecting mostly pink and red blossoms while adding a few blue and yellow accents.

In this era, it was very rare for a woman to pursue a professional career as a painter, much less one as successful as Ruysch's. Her career path and chosen subject matter may have been inspired by her highly accomplished family members. Her mother was the daughter of architect and painter Pieter Post as well as the niece of Frans Post, whose painting of Brazil is on view in this gallery. Ruysch's father was a professor of anatomy and botany. To support his studies, he assembled a large collection of plants, animals, insects, shells, and rocks, which the young Rachel often drew or decorated with flowers. When her parents recognized her talents, she began formal training at the age of 15. She later traveled to Düsseldorf, Germany, where she was the court painter for the elector-palatine Johann Wilhelm. The painting shown here was commissioned for his personal collection.

STOP 4

Religion and Church Buildings:

Reverend Johannes Elison and Maria Bockenolle

Speaker: Judith W. Mann
Curator of European Art to 1800
Saint Louis Art Museum

Hi, my name is Judy Mann. I'm the curator for European art to 1800 here at the Saint Louis Art Museum. You're looking at two portraits by Rembrandt van Rijn, one of the major figures, certainly, of the Dutch 17th century. These are portraits of the Reverend Johannes Elison and his wife, Maria Bockenolle. They were created in 1634. It was the commission of their son, also called Johannes, and it commemorates a visit, we believe, that the couple made to Amsterdam in 1634.

Elison was a Dutch Reformed preacher, and he was in Norwich, England. He had gone there to service a kind of immigrant community of worshippers who had fled the Netherlands during the Spanish occupation. What's really remarkable—certainly the size of these portraits is one thing—they're quite large. The son was a wealthy merchant; he wished to demonstrate his wealth and success by these marvelous portraits of his parents.

But what I want to look at is the way in which Rembrandt treats a very traditional form of portraiture: the paired portrait. He shows them in pretty much the identical poses: they both sit in chairs; they face one another; they both have their right arm extended and their left arm held against their body. In the case of the reverend, the right arm clasps the end of the arm of the chair. It's a more forceful, assertive gesture. His wife

also extends her right arm, but her fingers rest gingerly against the wood of the chair. For the reverend, he brings his left hand to his body—fingers splayed—it presses against his chest that gives us an image of passion and belief. In her case, she rests her left arm against more of her abdomen, and there isn't quite as assertive or easily identifiable passion in that pose. It's respectful, it's typical of female portraiture, but it doesn't give us insights into her personality.

Both of them have curtains behind; with hers, there's an indeterminate space; with him, there are books—books, books, and books—and then two specific books that are opened for us to peruse. Tilted up against the other books and opened is a book with . . . where he has taken the brush with gray, pale gray, paint and made very regular lines suggestive of a printed page—probably a Bible, we don't know. Open with face up on the table is a book in which the reverend has written. It has script, of handwriting. So this is the mark of a lively mind. He's a writer, he's a reader, and certainly Rembrandt wants to engage in this very fascinating person.

STOP 5

Religion and Church Buildings:

The Interior of the St. Bavo Church, Haarlem

Speaker: Judith W. Mann
Curator of European Art to 1800
Saint Louis Art Museum

We're fortunate in this exhibition to have three examples of the work of Pieter Saenredam, really one of the most beautiful painters of the church interior, and in fact, the first artist who really specialized in that type of painting. Now, Saenredam moved to Haarlem when he was 12 years old, and for the first 8 years of his career as a painter of church interiors, he focused on this one church, the church of St. Bavo, Haarlem, which you're looking at. This was the subject of his very first drawing. It was the subject of his first finished painting, so it really formed an important element of his career as an interior painter.

If we look at the image of St. Bavo, you'll recognize what a large church it was and certainly that seems to have been in Saenredam's mind as he composed this composition. The first drawing he made of the church is horizontal—very wide—and, in fact, has extra arches on either side. To make the painting, he cropped those off, and by doing so, he gave us the sensation—perhaps his sensation of when he was a young boy and first went to Haarlem—of how tall this church is, this massive Gothic building. And we look way, way up into the vaults, which he has shown us very narrowly as we look up. So that's a rather unusual image for Saenredam, but it makes a remarkable painting and quite an important document for understanding this artist.

The other pictures in this show are more, in some ways, typical of Saenredam. They're these wonderful, meticulous meditations on the relationship of vertical to horizontal and, at times, angled lines. Saenredam was a meticulous draftsman. He made drawing after drawing, each one identified according to date and place. He had a very clear process: he made his initial drawings, then he made them into more finished compositional studies, and then came back and made them into paintings. This could span a decade or more. Everything was labeled, everything was organized, and I think that mindset comes across clearly in these three very beautiful paintings.

STOP 6

The Art of Storytelling: *An Elegant Company Playing Cards*

Speaker: Elizabeth Wyckoff
Curator of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs
Saint Louis Art Museum

A young woman glances out, drawing us into a high-ceilinged interior, although plenty is already going on without us. If we look past the foreground, we spy a couple in a back room, but, well, we probably don't want to interrupt them: he's pulling her towards his lap, despite being in front of the open window.

Back in the front room, the key to the painting lies perhaps in the cards. The inviting woman holds almost all the aces: ace of spades is on the floor, clubs in her hand, along with other high cards, and—tellingly—hearts, which she is revealing only to us, behind her back. At this point, we have a pretty good sense that we are not witnessing a family gathering after church. This is a tavern, where opportunistic amorous pursuits and betting games are regular occurrences.

Jan Steen's paintings often depict known narratives set in his own time, including biblical stories, but just as often, they depict less specific moments of 17th-century modernity such as this one. Twenty-first-century viewers should remember, however, that the humor and innuendo evident here is a reminder that neither Steen nor his peers were simply depicting the lives and activities they saw around them. They wove their stories—satires and proverbs and other moralizing tales—into intriguing and, at best, intoxicating visual moments.

On top of being an extraordinary storyteller, Steen was also a master of detail. That's evident everywhere in this theatrical painting, from the woman's silky garment, which she protects with a white apron tied at her waist, and a *nachthalsdoek* around her neck (this is known in English as a night rail); to the depiction of seemingly every single knot of the Turkish—or, more specifically, Anatolian—carpet on the table, which was, by the way, how Oriental carpets were used in early modern European interiors. The elaborate finish continues in the lobed porcelain bowl being offered by the maidservant at left, the monochrome painted cupid on the cabinet behind her, and in each of the vessels displayed on it. The wine cooler in the left front corner is further evidence of the tavern setting. The exquisitely rendered sword on the back of the card-playing woman's chair, with its double shadow, must belong to her partner across the table. This final detail reminds us of the biblical story of the Philistine warrior Samson, who lost his powers after being lured by a beautiful woman. Steen's woman beckons, bringing us into her deception of the wayward soldier across the table. Duped into relinquishing his sword, he is well on his way to losing the card game, too.

STOP 7

Life in the Dutch Landscape: *Winter Landscape near a Village*

Speaker: Elizabeth Wyckoff
Curator of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs
Saint Louis Art Museum

Some Americans may turn to the 19th-century fictional character Hans Brinker when they think of ice-skating in Holland. Yet several paintings in this exhibition demonstrate that skating was indeed a beloved pastime in the 17th-century Dutch Republic. This is still true today: not only does the Netherlands produce speed-skating champions, the Dutch continue to revel in periodic cold snaps when the canals that connect city and countryside freeze over.

Many Dutch artists specialized in particular types of paintings, like still life or landscape, but Hendrick Avercamp was unusual for his pinpoint focus on winter outdoor activity—but then again, he did live during the so-called Little Ice Age, a centurylong period from about 1560 to 1650 that included unusually cold winters. And he was not alone—there are six other paintings in the exhibition that focus on these cold winters.

In Avercamp's painting, one of the first things you notice is the gray sky that merges with the icy horizon line in the distance. People from all walks of life have come out on the streets and waterways of their village on a cold, snowy, misty winter's day. On the left, you can see a well-dressed woman with a high hairdo conversing with three equally well-dressed men; two men in front of them lean down to strap on their skates, and just to their right, a more modestly and warmly dressed couple glides carefully across the ice

in their shoes. She is wearing the long, hooded cape known as a *huik* (h-u-i-k), which was still popular in the early decades of the 17th century and was defined by regional variations. On the right side of the frozen river, you'll see two others, including the so-called Brabant hooded cape with a round top surmounted by an upright attachment, as well as a duck-billed variant.

The crowd is enjoying a multitude of activities: A hole in the ice on the right suggests ice fishing; the fisherman is nearby with the tools of his trade on a sled. On the left and right, pairs of young dandies play *kolf*, an early version of golf/hockey. There is even a sailing boat rigged up on blades which has caught a fine blast of wind. Continuing the nautical theme, both sides of the riverbank, which for once are easily connected by the ice, sport outhouses that seem to be constructed out of discarded boat prows. Next to the inn on the right-hand side, you can even spy someone doing their business in a rather public way in the midst of all the festivities.

STOP 8

Celebrating the Landscape: *Wooded River Landscape with Shepherd*

Speaker: Judith W. Mann
Curator of European Art to 1800
Saint Louis Art Museum

You`re looking at Jacob van Ruisdael's painting called the *Wooded River Landscape with Shepherd*. Ruisdael is associated with the dramatic landscape, and I think this painting very much illustrates that aspect of his style. In fact, he was really one of the most versatile landscape painters in the Dutch Republic in the 17th century. He did it all: he painted dunes, rivers, fields, windmills, watermills, waterfalls, two very famous images of cemeteries. But this particular painting represents very well a kind of monumental, classical period of Dutch landscape that really also is quite dramatic.

It's a feast for the eyes—there's so much going on. Let's walk through the painting to see all of the activity that he's recorded before we look at it in general as a beautiful composition. Now, in the foreground, we have a couple who've come to rest on this birch; it's a birch tree that lies across the foreground. On the left, there's a road, and we have a shepherd who's minding a herd of sheep as they negotiate these logs that have been put across the road to allow people to have better footing as they traverse it. And then, up above, there's a couple also walking through the road. On the far right, we have fishermen pulling in their net in the river. And then behind them, there is probably a convent or monastery, perhaps just a church; there's a field with sheep in front of it, another shepherd and shepherdess minding those sheep. And then in the very distance there's a castle up right on the horizon line.

So when you step back and look at it as a whole, you understand, one, there's not nearly as much sky as you see often in Dutch landscapes. It's really cropped in more closely, which gives it more drama. And of course what we see first when we just glance at the picture is this bare limb, this massive oak tree has obviously been hit by lightning or some sort of natural disaster, as has the birch tree that fell down. And by using the contrast, the much paler tonality of that branch, the branch and the oak tree, it's getting more light, it stands out, and makes a dramatic contrast between that and the tree. The branch is diagonal—that in itself creates a kind of greater drama within the landscape. So you have this beautiful, darker-toned kind of triangular form going up to the left in the near foreground, and then in the distance, you have more greens, more, sort of, lighter tonalities, and you have this lovely flood of sunlight that falls across the meadow. All of that makes this a really rich and involving and powerful image of landscape as it was practiced in the Dutch Republic.

One would think perhaps that you're looking exactly at a scene that Ruisdael found or came upon in his wanderings. Usually they're very constructed. So probably this particular scene doesn't exist, and we probably know that for sure because the building in the background is a kind of timbered structure that occurs in a very particular part, the eastern part, of the Netherlands. He used this building in other examples. So we do know that this is a bit of a pastiche, but it works very beautifully as a single composition.