

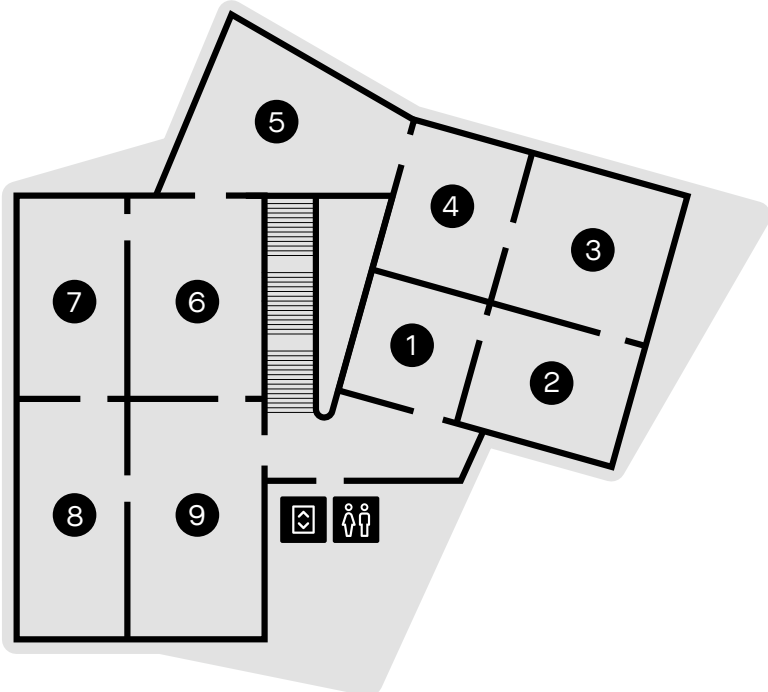
kunstmuseum basel

Rembrandt's Orient

31.10.2020—
14.2.2021

West Meets East in Dutch Art
of the Seventeenth Century

Kunstmuseum Basel | Neubau
2nd floor



Rembrandt's Orient

Rembrandt and his contemporaries repeatedly depicted objects from distant lands. The resulting works of art provide evidence of the first wave of globalization and reflect the influence of foreign cultures on the Netherlands of the seventeenth century. This significant art-historical period was shaped by a thirst for knowledge, a passion for collecting, and a pride in possession; it also inspired painters to create novel history scenes, portraits, and still lifes. The exhibition examines how the painters of the Dutch Golden Age reacted to the regions of the Middle and Far East of which they had become increasingly aware through trade, travel, and publications. Rembrandt is the starting point for all this. His fascination for 'the East' is reflected in his biblical histories featuring Orientalizing garments, in the *tronies* of 'Orientals,' and in his collection of exotic objects.

2 Turbans and Silk Robes: Bringing the Orient Home

The expansion of Dutch trade to different continents not only resulted in the acquisition of great fortunes for sections of the Republic's mercantile population. Owing to greater knowledge of the world and the availability of goods, faraway lands seeped into their lives—either intellectually through what they knew, or physically through the objects around them. Thus, developing a relationship to the Orient by no means required distant travel which, in any case, was only undertaken by a very small proportion of the population. Back home, the presence of the exotic also influenced lifestyles, fashions—and painting. Motifs with origins in foreign cultures began to crop up in genre paintings, portraits, and *portraits historiés*. These motifs were status symbols articulating social rank and wealth.

3 Paths to Prosperity: Trade and War

The global trade networks developed by the Dutch in the seventeenth century provided the basis for the interest in faraway lands and the availability of exotic objects. Visual representations on the theme of trade were typically neither realistic nor documentary in character, insofar as they made no claim to reproduce scenes faithfully or visualize episodes from history with scrupulous attention to facts. Rather, they were intended to convey prestige and fulfill a decorative function. This latter aspect even applied to depictions of the ongoing violent conflicts that formed one of the shadow sides of global trade. The Dutch Republic's wealth was also built on other devastating activities in East Asia such as slavery, economic exploitation, and violence—although negative topics such as these would at most be depicted in engravings published in books and never received artistic treatment from painters of the era.

4 Understanding the World: Collections and Research

In the Netherlands, the spread of trade to all continents fostered greater knowledge of the world and an expansion in learning. A plethora of books and maps described and opened up faraway lands to domestic readers. Amsterdam developed into a center of publishing. Portraits of scholars with books highlighted the idealization of learning that had emerged along with the ambition to pursue trade. The homes of wealthy burghers began to boast cabinets of curiosities for displaying prized objects such as exotic shells. Still lifes and interior scenes lavished attention on exotic and valuable items. This intellectual engagement with the world beyond Europe's shores assumed various forms, albeit sometimes superficial and—as exemplified by attitudes towards Islam—marked by intolerance. Only a small number of occasions are documented when scholars from different countries engaged in direct intellectual exchange.

5 Rattan: A Case Study

Not only imported oriental spices and Chinese porcelain enjoyed great success in the Netherlands: the inventory of an Amsterdam shop from 1664 for example lists a stock of no fewer than 1 700 rattan canes. The light but solid wood of this climbing palm common to Indonesia (then the Dutch East Indies) was ideal for making walking sticks. Military personnel and civilians both used them: In the genre painting by Simon Kick displayed here, the fashionably dressed commander of the small patrol proudly shows his swagger stick made of branded rattan. Similar sticks are still crafted from rattan for use by practitioners of several martial arts.

Rembrandt, too, owned several rattan walking sticks, as an entry in the inventory of his insolvent estate from 1656 demonstrates: “Op de agterste richel ... Eenige Rottinge” (On the shelf in the back ... several rattan sticks).

His famous *Nightwatch* of 1642 already includes a prominently placed example of an imported cane: Its protagonist, Captain Frans Banninck Cocq, seems to advance energetically towards the spectator, gaining momentum by pushing his long swagger stick made of rattan or bamboo.

6 The Landscape of the Bible: Early Rembrandt and His Models

In the seventeenth century, books on foreign cultures and reports by pilgrims and travelers returning from expeditions to the Middle and Far East were readily available in the Netherlands. However, very few Dutch had actually seen the Orient with their own eyes or had any idea of the prevailing conditions there. For most, the Orient was first of all the place where the events of the Bible had occurred. Rembrandt and his contemporaries staged their depictions of stories from the Old and New Testaments in landscapes of rocky scrubland and grayish-brown hills that were very different from the verdant green plains of the northern Netherlands. The artists populated these pictorial settings with men wearing turbans and women in colorful, often lavish costumes. Although they were largely figments of the artists' imaginations, the colors and patterns of some of the silks, for instance, may have resembled actual seventeenth-century imported fabrics.

7 Light in the Temple: Rembrandt in Amsterdam and His Followers

In the 1630s Rembrandt and other painters often depicted biblical stories set in dimly lit interiors, be it the stable in Bethlehem or a temple. Exotic motifs such as turbans, robes, and swords were again used to lend authenticity to the scenes. Rather than being a magnificent fairy-tale backdrop, however, the Oriental setting envisioned in these paintings was usually a sacred site—the place where God's wisdom was revealed to the Israelites or where the miraculous events of Christian salvation unfolded. Rembrandt was able to demonstrate his deft command of light in the dark arches of the buildings, with beams of light reflected on metallic surfaces. As well as enhancing the impression of spatial recession and pictorial depth, they also emphasized the meaning of the work.

8 Familiarizing the Exotic: Rembrandt's Adaptation of the Orient

Fascination with the Orient in the Netherlands of the seventeenth century stemmed not only from the aesthetic pleasure to be attained from beautiful and luxurious objects. It was also linked to the positive associations of the imaginary world of the Bible, as represented in Rembrandt's paintings. One essential aspect of the enthusiasm for these sumptuous images can be explained by the contemporary mindset. The lavish opulence of the clothing and precious items in Orientalizing paintings contrasted starkly with the puritan sparseness of Calvinism. Interest in these exotic scenes was spurred by the desire for the unusual and the extraordinary. The 'Orient' was the other, an abstraction of what was possible, a surface on which to project personal desires that had no place in the rationalistic worldview of the West, as epitomized by Protestantism.

9 True to Life? Or Mere Convention?

Orientalizing costumes and settings were used to create an atmospheric backdrop for biblical narratives. In those paintings, the question of the reality behind such Orientalizing motifs was of little concern. But this was not the case for portraits and landscapes that claimed to represent a real place or person. However, only a few Netherlandish paintings from the seventeenth century aimed to provide a reliable representation of far-off lands and their inhabitants. There was clearly no interest in creating authentic images of different regions and people. Many works simply confirmed existing clichés and stereotypes. Original artworks from East Asia, such as miniatures from India and Persia, were given scant attention. They were rarely collected and only a small number of Dutch painters—among them, notably, Rembrandt—studied them in any greater detail.

Guided tours in English

Sun 6.12., 3.1., 7.2., 2–3 pm

Costs: Entry + CHF 5

Kuratorenführungen

mit Bodo Brinkmann

Mi 4.11., 3.2., 18.30–19.30 Uhr

Costs: Entry + CHF 5

Rendez-vous am Mittag

mit Assistenzkurator Gabriel Dette

Di 10.11., 8.12., 12.30–13 Uhr

Costs: Entry + CHF 5

The exhibition, a cooperation with the Museum Barberini in Potsdam, is being held under the patronage of Her Excellency Hedda Samson, Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Switzerland.

Rembrandt's Orient is supported by:

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Opening Hours

Tue–Sun 10 am–6 pm / Wed 10 am–8 pm

Admission

Adults CHF 26

Reduced CHF 18 / 13 / 8

Tickets online → shop.kunstmuseumbasel.ch

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