

THE
SECRET
OF **The**
Night Watch

MARC POS

TERRA



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Foreword

In the autumn of 2021, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam was the setting for a remarkable *mise-en-scène*. While outside, the wind blew past the high stained glass windows of the majestic museum, inside—in an imposing space called the *Voorhal* (foyer)—a painter, a restorer, a materials expert, a science historian, and a museum director gathered, amicably side by side. They had humbly positioned themselves in front of an enormous painting that still smelled wonderfully of hundreds of litres of fresh paint. For several minutes, the group silently admired the beautifully lit canvas.

In the recording that was made of this moment—the denouement of the new season of the TV series *Masterpiece*—the five even looked somewhat impressed, but in reality, the situation was different than the images on television would later suggest.

Although the protagonists appeared to be quietly admiring the overwhelming work of art in reality, they were surrounded by cameramen, cable pullers, grips, gaffers, production staff, attendants, editors, board and network directors, a floor manager, a producer and a few other jubilant guests. Two people operated a mobile camera crane that was several metres high; in various places, lightboxes were hidden, and in a corner, staff members filled flutes with sparkling wine because the mood was exuberant.

All in all, a lively tableau that surprisingly resembled the atmosphere of the venerable painting that had brought the company together that evening: a canvas with the rather lengthy title: *Officers and other civic guardsmen of District II in Amsterdam, under the command of Captain Frans Banninck Cocq and Lieutenant Willem van Ruytenburch*. In other words, *The Night Watch*, the most famous Dutch work of art of all time. Had Rembrandt van Rijn lived today, he could have painted a scene of this joyful gathering in the Rijksmuseum that was just as animated and lifelike as the evocative group portrait he delivered to the Amsterdam *Schuttersgilde* (Civic Guard) in 1642.

The book in your hands is an account of a crazy project that started in February 2021. After reproducing thirty national and international paintings, the illustrious *TSOMP* team was ready for the most significant

challenge in the history of the now internationally acclaimed TV program: the detailed and historically accurate reconstruction of Rembrandt's most famous painting. What a plan! What bravura!

The Rijksmuseum, where *The Night Watch* has been on display since 1885, allowed the *TSOMP* team to set up a temporary studio in the most ideal workplace imaginable: directly opposite the original Rembrandt canvas, eye to eye with the masterpiece.

This is where Lisa Wiersma, Michel van de Laar, Joris Dik and Thijs Hagendijk were able to work on the almost impossible task they had set for themselves and the rest of their team. Would it be possible to faithfully reconstruct the painting—17.1 square meters in size—using old techniques? Welcome to the world of weaving techniques, underdrawing, underpainting, dripping impastos, oiling out, and grinding lac insects for their colour.

The data gathered by the museum's 'Operation Night Watch'—the code name of the restoration of the original painting, begun in 2019—turned out to be very useful in this challenging quest. Using every possible scientific technique, the canvas was scanned, observed, analysed, and examined millimetre by millimetre, yielding a mountain of useful data for the *TSOMP* team to work with.

Over the centuries, Rembrandt's only *schuttersstuk* (civic guard portrait) had to endure a lot. Not only was there the natural ageing of paint, pigment, canvas and varnish layers, there were also many well-intentioned restorations and deliberate or unintentional damage. Strips were cut from the painting, a hammer fell through the canvas, someone attacked the work of art with a cobbler's knife and another slashed it twelve times with a box cutter, acid was thrown on it and, during the war, it was rolled up so that it could be safely stored in a Limburg cave. All these scars and minor flaws have not detracted from the expressiveness and the magic of the image, the overwhelming enchantment with which *The Night Watch* has captivated spectators for 380 years.

I don't want to spoil the plot or tell you what happens in the chapters of this book, but from my own observations, I can report that the phenomenal reconstruction created by Lisa, Michel, Joris, Thijs and everyone else who put their heart and soul into this project, evoked a similar sense of overwhelming wonder.

Ronald Giphart

Introduction

In 2015, David Beker, Jonas Hemink and I developed the concept for a TV program: *Masterpiece*. The idea appealed to me because the program would discuss art and culture in a fascinating and accessible way, without simplification and with content that would appeal to enthusiasts and connoisseurs. To me, this combination of quality content and accessibility is the core of the program. Culture, in this case art, is a crucial, binding element in society; it is crucial that we can share it well.

Masterpiece has become an inspiring program that has now also been translated into books, theatre productions, exhibitions, painting competitions and lectures. I think that's because *Masterpiece* is an adventure both in front of and behind the camera. We work as a forensic team, looking for answers hidden in the materials, working method, history, and the life and thoughts of the artist. We go in depth; our team consists of specialists who have an excellent network and inventive minds; also, all of our team members are exceedingly stubborn when they have an idea in mind.

During this 'Tintin'-type adventure, we also work on the reconstruction. The discoveries we make find their way into a new work of art. There is something intensely romantic about going through that process together. How often do you devote all your attention to a subject, a work, a brush stroke or the ground onto which that brush stroke is applied? The work, the concentration, the discipline, and the urge to repeat the process as precisely as possible, all bring us closer to the artist. You get inside someone's mind; you try to recognise a view of the world and discover what someone wanted to say by copying their work exactly. This process is always remarkable. The television program has to ask questions no one has ever asked, looking for a solution, a 'perpetrator'. In that sense, it's as exciting as a whodunnit: how close can we get to the Master?

In the end, that is the question the program literally asks. We put the original and the reconstruction side by side and ask the audience to compare. Our best outcome is when a viewer, who would typically not be able to tell them apart, can see the differences thanks to the insights in the show. By following the adventure of the program, the viewer



Lisa and her team of painters

recognises the hand of the master and can, with us, respectfully bow to the virtuosity of the original.

For *Masterpiece* we have reconstructed thirty works in this way. From Mondrian's *Victory Boogie Woogie* and *Girl with a Pearl Earring* by Johannes Vermeer to Vincent van Gogh's *Self-Portrait with Gray Felt Hat* and Pieter Bruegel's *The Tower of Babel*. Each one unique, surprising and overwhelming in its own way. And now we've used all the knowledge and experience we gained for our *pièce de résistance*: *The Night Watch*, literally and figuratively one of the greatest masterpieces in the world.

We've made the reconstruction with a large team of scientists, researchers, production staff, editors and directors. In the foreground are a painter, a restorer, a historian of science and a materials expert.

Lisa Wiersma is an art historian, painter and illustrator. All the knowledge we acquire eventually flows through her brush onto the canvas. Restorer Michel van de Laar takes care of the restoration history and the ageing of our reconstructions. Science historian Thijs Hagendijk provides context and interpretation. Moreover, he keeps finding these old paint recipes. And then makes the paint as they used to do. Joris Dik is a



The *Secret of The Night Watch* team. From left to right: Thijs Hagendijk, Michel van de Laar, Lisa Wiersma, and Joris Dik

renowned researcher at TU Delft whose insights into the materials and their uses are indispensable. In addition to knowing their craft, all four are excellent storytellers.

We see the reconstruction of *The Night Watch* as a culmination of our work. And afterwards... we'll continue. Because there are still so many stories to tell and reconstructions to be made. I promise you; we will keep surprising you.

Marc Pos



Meeting Rembrandt

Before we start our reconstruction of *The Night Watch*, we want to learn as much as we can about seventeenth-century materials, techniques, and trends.

Which choices is Rembrandt making? And how do those choices influence his work? At the same time, we want to see the world as he saw it.

What did his Amsterdam look like? What was happening in his life between 1640 and 1642? And, what kind of man was he?

Amsterdam in 1642

1642: Blaise Pascal develops the first mechanical calculator. Abel Tasman discovers New Zealand. Galileo Galilei dies. Claudio Monteverdi is composing *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*. And Rembrandt is putting the finishing touches on *The Night Watch*.

A busy, bustling city

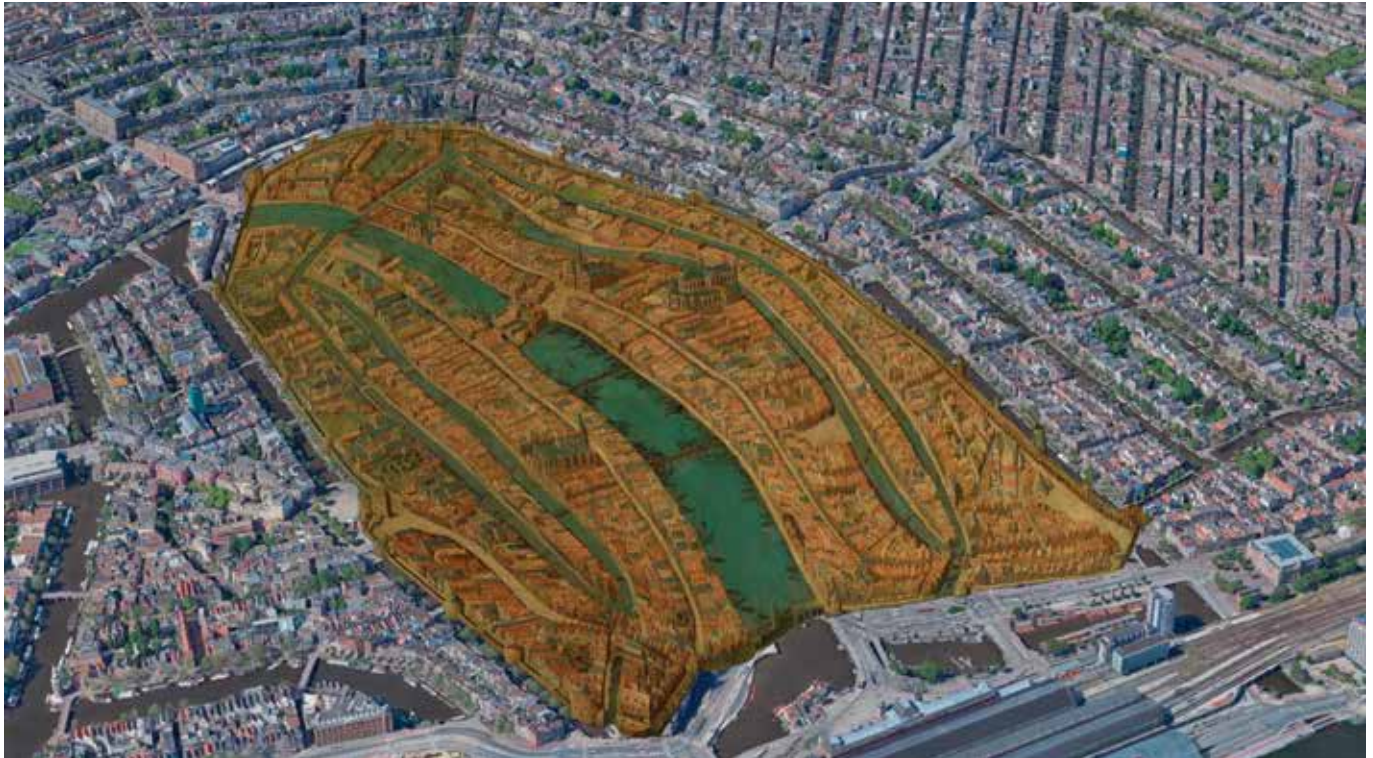
In 1642 the Netherlands is at the tail end of a long-running revolt against Spain, the Eighty Years' War. After a period of resistance and rebellion, briefly broken by an interim ceasefire, the tide finally seems to be turning. The Dutch East India Company (VOC) is flourishing, and cities are making significant industrial developments. This spurs economic growth at a time when the Spanish army is struggling. The Dutch war chest is brimming, essential victories are won at sea, and the Dutch manage to shift the battle lines to the frontiers of this increasingly powerful Republic.

In short, in the mid-seventeenth century, things are going well for the young Dutch Republic,

and for Amsterdam doubly so. It's a relatively small city, especially when compared to Paris or London. However, as a young city, it eagerly seizes every opportunity and quickly takes on a pivotal role in the global economy, and this attracts people.

In the first half of the seventeenth century, Amsterdam grows exponentially. In 1612 it is home to about thirty thousand citizens. At that time, miller's son Rembrandt van Rijn is six years old and living in Leiden, where, as a child, he is surrounded by the images, sounds and smells of his father's mill. A little less than twenty years later, when twenty-five-year-old Rembrandt moves to Amsterdam, it is a city of over one-hundred-and-twenty-five thousand people. All these people need to live somewhere, work somewhere, do their shopping somewhere and go to church. This is why the city develops at a breakneck pace, including the Canal District and the Jordaan. It must have been quite a construction site, with constant sounds of new things being built.

Self-portrait with a flat cap and embroidered dress,
Rembrandt van Rijn, ca. 1642



Amsterdam in 1642, indicated in brown on an aerial photo of the city in the 21st century

Amsterdam is becoming a prosperous city. And the wealthy, who had benefited from the growing trade opportunities want to show that off. One of the ways they did so was by commissioning individual or family portraits. The art industry is flourishing, and production has to be carried out rapidly to meet the demand. Now that artists are working not only for the church or the nobility but also the wealthy bourgeoisie, artworks start to change as well. The size and subject matter start to diversify as increasingly diverse genres find their way onto the canvas.

In addition to the economic boom and the demand for art, the Dutch Republic is remarkably innovative. This is because it's easier to exchange ideas and develop inventions in the Netherlands than in other countries. In short, the perfect place for a young, eager artist who is also quite headstrong.

A Difficult Man to Comprehend

Rembrandt was born on July 15, 1606. The ninth child of a reasonably well-to-do miller in Leiden. He was good at drawing. At the age of fourteen, his parents enrolled him as a student at the *Latijnse School* (Latin School), where he would also receive an education in theology. When he was about fifteen or sixteen years old, he abandoned his academic education for an apprenticeship, first with master painter Jacob van Swanenburgh and two years later with Pieter Lastman in Amsterdam. He was not yet twenty years old when he started his own business. His earliest dated painting, *The Stoning of Saint Stephen*, is from 1625. In the three years that followed, his fame grew to such an extent that by 1628 he was able to take on his first apprentice, Gerard Dou.



The Painter's Studio, Adriaen van Ostade, ca. 1647-ca. 1650

The master painter

Initially, Rembrandt was living and working in Leiden. His colleague and fellow student Jan Lievens was a significant influence during that time. It's possible that they shared a studio, and it seems that their friendship, and the friendly competition between them, encouraged them both in their artistic development.

After a visit to their studio, art expert and secretary to the stadtholder, Constantijn Huygens, described the young artists. In Rembrandt, he recognised the superior of the two when it came to the accuracy and liveliness with which he portrayed emotions. In a report of that visit, he noted that both gentlemen lived and worked for their trade: 'The most remarkable thing is that they dismiss even the most innocent of pleasures of youth as a waste of time.'

By the time Rembrandt is twenty-five, he is already known for his signature style: the naturalness of his portraits, how he portrays emotions,

and how he uses chiaroscuro. He receives a wide variety of commissions from prominent families in Leiden. And, thanks to the mediation of Constantijn Huygens, he sees his work included in the art collections of important people such as Frederick Henry of Orange and King Charles I of England.

Making a name for himself

In 1631 Rembrandt moves to Amsterdam and lives as a boarder with one of the most important art dealers of the time, Hendrick Uylenburgh. He will head up Hendrick's bustling, famous painting workshop, which can be seen as a kind of 'portrait factory' for Amsterdam's wealthy citizens. Rembrandt uses Hendrick's painting workshop, located close to Pieter Lastman's, as his own studio.

The coming years promise to be sweet ones. Rembrandt joins the painters' guild, his fame continues to rise, and he meets his future wife



Rembrandt's home on Sint Antoniesbreestraat, currently The Rembrandt House Museum (Jodenbreestraat)



Rembrandt's studio in The Rembrandt House Museum

Saskia Uylenburgh—Hendrick's niece. His career skyrockets, especially commissions for portraits and history paintings. Within a few years, Rembrandt and Saskia are able to rent a brand new house at Nieuwe Doelenstraat and, after that, at Zwanenburgerstraat (where Amsterdam's City Hall and the Dutch National Opera house, known as the Stopera, now stands).

In 1639 Rembrandt, now a famous artist, buys a beautiful merchant's house—in the district for the cultural and administrative elite—for thirteen thousand guilders. This house is located at the Sint Antoniesbreestraat—currently the Jodenbreestraat—next to the atelier of Hendrick Uylenburgh and artist Nicolaes Eliasz. Pickenoy's house. And, coincidentally, while Rembrandt was working on *The Night Watch*, that same Pickenoy would paint one of the other paintings

of the *schutterij* (civil guard) in the Doelenzaal. During this period, Rembrandt almost entirely stopped painting portraits and started a series of large history paintings such as the *Danaë* (1636), *The Blinding of Samson* (1636) and *The Wedding of Samson* (1638).

Rembrandt in his element

Rembrandt and Saskia are now living in style. Saskia is from a wealthy, patrician family, and Rembrandt is doing well financially. This creates enough financial space for him to indulge in his other passion: collecting art and all kinds of objects.

The Rembrandt residence is animated by students, customers and art collectors coming and going. Rembrandt receives clients and close friends from the highest circles in the front



The *Sael* in The Rembrandt House Museum, Rembrandt and Saskia's living room

rooms of his stately home. The family lives in the chamber behind that room. This is a high, spacious area with a large fireplace and a box bed that can be seen in some of Rembrandt's work. On the first floor, Rembrandt uses one of the rooms as a cabinet of curiosities, the place he keeps and displays his ever-growing collection. His studio is located next to it, in the largest room in the house. Here he paints and supervises four to five apprentices. It's the perfect space, the largest room in the house, and the natural light is ideal for painting. In the attic, the students also have their own space to practice and work in peace, separated by partitions. Some of the students working with Rembrandt will be

among the most successful and famous Dutch artists. Painters like Govert Flinck, Ferdinand Bol, and Carel Fabritius learn the tricks of the trade in Rembrandt's studio.

Three turbulent years

Happiness and sadness alternate in the lives of Rembrandt and Saskia. They want to start a family, but before buying the house on Sint Antoniesbreestraat, they had already lost two young children: little Rombertus, born and deceased in 1635, and daughter Cornelia, who will not live past one month in the summer of 1638. Their second daughter, Cornelia, is born in 1640 in their house at Sint Antoniebreestraat, but she too



Rembrandt's Son Titus in a Monk's Habit, Rembrandt van Rijn, 1660

THE NIGHT WATCH FACTS

Title: *The Night Watch, Officers and other civic guardsmen of District II in Amsterdam, under the command of Captain Frans Banninck Cocq and Lieutenant Willem van Ruytenburch*

Artist: Rembrandt van Rijn

Place: Amsterdam

Dating: between 1640 and 1642
signed, Rembrandt 1642

Technique: oil paint on canvas

Measurements:
original height 379.5 cm and width 453.5 cm
current height 363 cm and width 438 cm

Weight (without frame): 170 kg





Self-portrait with Saskia, Rembrandt van Rijn, 1636

died within three weeks. A year after Cornelia's death, Saskia and Rembrandt's fourth child is born: Titus. He will be the only child to survive his mother, although he eventually dies in 1668, a year before Rembrandt's death.

Saskia's illness overshadows the happiness

of having a healthy son. She spends a lot of time sick in bed. Saskia dies in the summer of 1642, just before her thirtieth birthday.

Rembrandt often drew and painted his wife during their marriage, as he would his son Titus. From the way he portrays Saskia's face, you can



Courtyard of The Rembrandt House Museum. This is where Rembrandt may have worked on *The Night Watch*

tell he knew her as a lover, husband and master painter. Rembrandt paints the first known portrait of Saskia just after their engagement and completes the last one after her death. She seems to appear as a model in several of his artworks. Once you know this, you'll quickly notice her in his work—her big eyes, petite mouth and round face. A girl with similar facial features is depicted in *The Night Watch*.

Between 1640 and 1642, Rembrandt paints *The Night Watch*. This is a period in which Rembrandt, as mentioned, is dealing with a lot of loss. Somewhere around the time of Saskia's death, he finishes the large canvas. It is not exactly certain where he is working. Upstairs in his studio is too small. If he painted it at his house, the courtyard, outside, would be the only suitable place. It has a roof, and perhaps Rembrandt enlarged the gallery to work on the large painting there.

Wherever it was, Rembrandt creates one of the most acclaimed masterpieces in history during some immensely turbulent years.

Detail of *The Night Watch*. The face of the young girl is said to be a portrait of Saskia



After *The Night Watch*

After *The Night Watch*, Rembrandt's work changes. He paints less and mainly concentrates on drawing and etching. After Saskia's death, he employs Geertje Dirckx as a housekeeper. The two start a relationship that comes to a disastrous end when Geertje takes Rembrandt to court at the 'Huwelijkskrakeelkamer' (Family court) for breach of promise. When Geertje rejects Rembrandt's alimony proposal, he, in turn, persuades her brother to make incriminating statements, which leads to Geertje being locked up for several years in a spinning house in Gouda, a detention centre where women were forced to spin and sew to get back on the right track. His troubles with Geertje are all happening in 1649, a year in which not a single dated painting or etching by Rembrandt is documented.

With Geertje under lock and key, dated work by Rembrandt is starting to appear again. A new woman enters his life, Hendrickje Stoffels. Like Geertje, she is Rembrandt's housekeeper and mistress, but they aren't married. It's likely that they don't marry in order to ensure that Rembrandt continues to have access to Saskia's inheritance. Hendrickje becomes Rembrandt's new muse and they continue living together unmarried from 1649 until her death in 1663.

The collector

About ten years after finishing *The Night Watch*, Rembrandt runs into financial difficulties. The situation is so dire that eventually he declares bankruptcy. The house and its contents are sold. For the auction of his household effects, a list is drawn up of all the objects that Rembrandt collected in his spacious home. The list confirms the image of Rembrandt as an almost compulsive collector and hoarder. He appears to be fascinated by rarities, exotic and strange objects, many of which also appear in his paintings.

On the list of 363 objects, at least 200 are from the 'kunstcaemer' (cabinet of curiosities). The collection Rembrandt displays consists of objects from nature ('naturalia') and art objects made by human hands ('artificialia'). In Rembrandt's collection, one can find dried animals, a tortoise shell, coral, a lion's skin, a snakeskin, beautiful tableware, exotic weapons, clothing, plaster copies of famous Roman portrait busts, coins, tokens and also spears and lances (which probably served as models for the spears and lances in *The Night Watch*). He also collects objects in other rooms of the house, such as an extensive collection of musical instruments in the studio and 130 paintings throughout his home. Rembrandt was not only an artist, he also traded the paintings of other artists.

The most extensive and most valuable part of the collection, however, was his assortment of drawings and prints. He owned some 8,000 images, kept in just under 70 albums, neatly filed under the artist's name, country of origin or subject. Rembrandt mainly collected prints by other artists and copies of paintings by, for example, Peter Paul Rubens and Albrecht Dürer. Rembrandt never travelled, he went on a journey through his own collection in his own home. It's only because he filed for bankruptcy that we know what he collected.

In anonymity

After the bankruptcy, Rembrandt and Hendrickje move to a smaller rental house on the Rozengracht. But even after that bankruptcy, Rembrandt cannot curb his desire to collect; he immediately creates a new collection in his new, modest house.

Although he is not as successful as he was in previous decades, Rembrandt remains popular enough to continue working as an artist. Meanwhile, Hendrickje and his son Titus start a painting and art dealership that employs Rembrandt. In this way, the trio manages to keep the pro-



The cabinet of curiosities in The Rembrandt House Museum, where Rembrandt kept and displayed his collection

ceeds from Rembrandt's work out of the hands of creditors. Rembrandt can continue his work unabated and quarrel with clients about that work. A late highlight and significant commission in these years is the now world-famous painting *The Syndics*.

Hendrickje dies in 1663, followed by Titus in 1668. Rembrandt continues to work until his lonely death on October 4, 1669. Without financial means, he is buried in a rented grave in the Westerkerk. Without a headstone, anonymous. Not quite the grave one would expect for this master painter.

p. 26 and 27: *The Sampling Officials of the Amsterdam Drapers' Guild*, better known as *The Syndics*, Rembrandt van Rijn, 1662