

# Rembrandt *remastered*

Renowned Rembrandt expert Ernst van de Wetering explains to Ken Wilkie how Golden Age painting *The Mill* was finally attributed to Dutch master Rembrandt van Rijn

**T**o say that Rembrandt was a great artist is not enough. His art told stories. He knew how to make his pictures talk and gave them life.

Despite his fame, like a rock star or king, the miller's son from Leiden was enshrined in an air of mystery.

Unlike Van Gogh, Rembrandt wrote almost nothing about his work, which has made knowing his thoughts – and attributing his works – a tricky task.

But the great painter was also a great tutor, who inspired the next generation of Dutch talent, including Govert Flinck and Ferdinand Bol. One pupil, Samuel van Hoogstraten, wrote in detail about the skills he learned in Rembrandt's studio, many of which were applied to Rembrandt's early history paintings.

They included proportions and movement of the human figure, composition, expression, light effects, costume, use of colour and handling of the brush. Combined with new technology and academic expertise, such writings are casting new light on works by the old master.

*The Mill* is one such painting. Created between 1640 and 1645, it was originally in the collection of Philippe, Duke of Orléans, and now hangs in the Widener Collection of The National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC.

After a long period during which this unsigned painting was seen as one of Rembrandt's finest works, in 1911 the attribution to Rembrandt was rejected by the German art historian Woldemar von Seidlitz.

His opinion was accepted unquestioningly by most Rembrandt specialists at the time.

Ernst van de Wetering is today considered the world's preeminent Rembrandt expert. He has a theory about where Von Seidlitz may have gone awry.

"This may have had to do with the fact that the painting had been drastically cropped on two sides, possibly to fit a frame," he says.

"This meant that the painting had lost the relation between light and shadow, which is so typical of Rembrandt."

This was also done in such a way that the painting was placed in its



ABOVE  
***The Mill* (c. 1645) as it is today in The National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC.**

RIGHT  
**The digital version, restored to its presumed original scale and colours, with Rembrandt's distinctive balance of light and dark. The line marks out the painting above**

frame askew, tilted to the right.

"It is still tilted, disturbing the balance typical of Rembrandt's works. The painting's original asymmetry, which contributes to the particular dynamic quality of Rembrandt's paintings, was also disturbed," says Van de Wetering.

"Armed with our present-day knowledge of standard widths of painters' canvases and the so-called 'cusing' – that is deformation in the fabric due to stretching of the canvas – we were



able to reconstruct the painting digitally,” he explains.

“Without a doubt it is painted by Rembrandt. It is a fantastic work.”

Rembrandt’s life was also a play of light and shadow. Prosperity, financial ruin, love and mourning followed one another in stormy succession.

In the 1640s, he was living with his wife Saskia in what is now the Rembrandthuis museum in Amsterdam. When not in his studio, he often roamed in and around the city, sketching and taking inspiration for etchings and paintings. The mill in the painting of the same name may have been a windmill on one of the city’s bulwarks.

“The painting had lost the relation between light and shadow so typical of Rembrandt”

As a portrait painter, apart from commissioned work, he featured his wife in several studies. Together they had a son Titus, who Rembrandt also often portrayed.

After Saskia’s death and the personal and economic problems that followed, he

moved to a house on the Rozengracht to live with his lover Hendrickje Stoffels. She also modelled for him, ran the shop on the ground floor of the house and they had a daughter, Cornelia.

Whether in portraits or landscapes, light was Rembrandt’s element and his passion. They say Leonardo invented the dramatic effect of light and shade known as *chiaroscuro*, that it was Caravaggio who made it spectacular and Rembrandt who gave it magic and humanity.

He experimented with different styles and forms of light and shadow throughout his life and none of his contemporaries used it as subtly as he did.

He was a genius at balancing it. Like the figures in *The Night Watch* that ▶▶

▶▶ seem to float in space, a painting full of subtle movement and asymmetry.

“Hang my paintings in a strong light,” Rembrandt wrote in a short note to his friend Constantijn Huygens.

“With Rembrandt, there is never a dull moment,” says Van de Wetering.

Today, Rembrandt’s art is spread out in collections all over the world. In the past, only art historians really got close to him and explained his life and work to people through books.

But with the development of new technology, his works are becoming more accessible.

In the basement gallery of Magna Plaza, a few steps from Dam Square, all his paintings can now be seen together – his life’s work in paint – digitally reproduced in a permanent exhibition.

Under one roof you see the Rembrandts that hang in galleries throughout Europe and the United States. No frames, just the images, shown side by side, lit by LED.

Head of the Rembrandt Research Project for 20 years, Van de Wetering selected all the works shown in this exhibition. He believes that digitally restored reproductions of paintings can surpass originals.

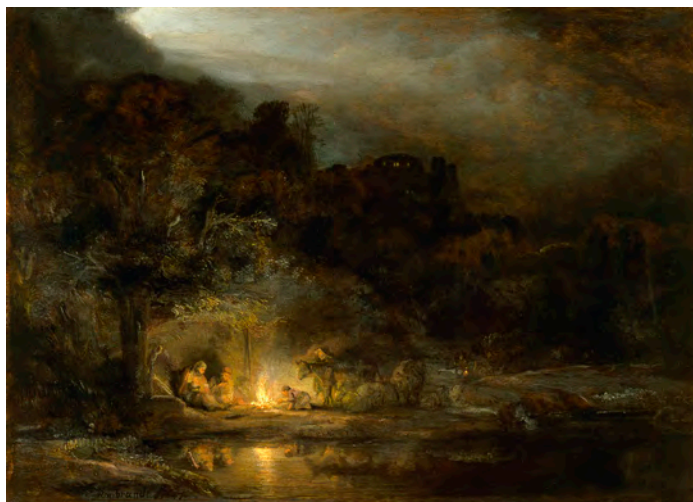
“We show Rembrandt’s paintings chronologically and thematically, actual size and you see them more or less as they were right after they were painted, as far as possible in their original state,” he says.

“For instance, we have been able to digitally remove the layers of varnish that have, over the years, made Rembrandt’s colours too yellow.”

Van de Wetering points to a photograph of a restored oil painting where cracked varnish disfigures the view with hundreds of disturbing catch lights.



**Two fine example's of Rembrandt's balancing of light and dark. Above is *Two Old Men Disputing in Sunlight* (the 1628 original hangs in the The National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne), while right is *Nocturnal Landscape with the Holy Family* (the 1647, original hangs in Dublin's National Gallery of Ireland)**



“These tiny light reflections are removed in our digital images,” he says.

As a visitor, you have to get used to being so close to the artist’s work. You can literally stand nose to nose and eye to eye with Rembrandt’s subjects. There are no guards here to keep you at a safe distance.

Digital remastering has also brought paintings back to life. Rembrandt’s *Danaë*, the portrait he made in 1636 of a half-naked woman reclining in bed, was seriously damaged with acid by a disturbed man at The Hermitage in St. Petersburg in 1985. Thanks to the discovery and remastering of old images of the painting it can now be seen as it was before the attack.

## See more

The exhibition *Rembrandt: All his Paintings* is at Magna Plaza, near Dam Square. See [rembrandtallhispaintings.com](http://rembrandtallhispaintings.com). For more on the man and his life, The Rembrandthuis Museum is in his former home near Waterlooplein ([rembrandthuis.nl](http://rembrandthuis.nl)). *The Night Watch* and 19 other Rembrandt works are in The Rijksmuseum ([rijksmuseum.nl](http://rijksmuseum.nl)).

Rembrandt’s famous *The Night Watch* is also on show of course, but it is the whole composition as Rembrandt painted it. Centuries ago, large strips were cut off the original to make it fit a wall in Amsterdam’s Town Hall.

Some critics maintain that photographic reproductions can never be substitutes for oil paint. Van de Wetering brushes this aside. “Digitally reproduced works can in fact show more,” he says. “as many museums show their Rembrandts in poor lighting conditions.”

As an artist so dedicated to finding perfect light, you can’t help but think he may have approved. ■