Rembrandt’s Orient:  
West Meets East in Dutch Art of the Seventeenth Century

Press Conference  
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Online press conference on Zoom

With:  
Ortrud Westheider, director, Museum Barberini  
Michael Philipp, head curator, Museum Barberini  
Dorothee Entrup and Andrea Schmidt, education, Museum Barberini

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To download images, please visit:  
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Press contact:  
Achim Klapp, Marte Kräher  
Museum Barberini  
Humboldtstr. 5–6, 14467 Potsdam, Germany  
T +49 331 236014 305/308  
presse@museum-barberini.de  
www.museum-barberini.de
Rembrandt’s Orient: 
West Meets East in Dutch Art of the Seventeenth Century
March 13 to June 27, 2021

Potsdam, March 11, 2021—Rembrandt and his contemporaries were fascinated by the distant lands from which a great number of novel goods were imported to the Netherlands beginning in the seventeenth century. The enthusiasm for things foreign became fashionable and resulted in a new type of art that combined painted realism with idealized images and fantastical projections. Paintings illustrating biblical stories were also enriched with exotic elements. From today’s perspective, the drawbacks of this way of appropriating the world are apparent: the imbalance of power between cultures, which was manifest in slavery, violence, exploitation, and trade wars, was not represented. Rembrandt’s paintings with “Oriental” touches reflect the Dutch fascination with the exotic. Both true to life and alienated, they represent an alternative realm that contrasted with everyday life in the Calvinist Netherlands. Far from being a playful masquerade, they represent a self-questioning under different conditions. This fundamental aspect of the art is being presented in an exhibition for the first time.

This exhibition focuses on how foreign things were depicted in Rembrandt’s age, at a time when the Levant, the eastern Mediterranean region, and Asia were known collectively as “the Orient.” The Eurocentrism that resulted from the movement of Orientalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has contaminated this term today; the possessive form used in the exhibition title, Rembrandt’s Orient, indicates that the show is concerned with the ideas then associated with the term. The artworks exhibited at the Potsdam venue provide evidence of the first wave of globalization and reflect the influence of distant countries on the Netherlands of the seventeenth century. However, Rembrandt is the starting point for all of this. His fascination for “the East” is reflected in his biblical histories featuring Orientalizing garments, in his character studies (tronies) of “Orientals,” and in his collection of exotic objects. Many of Rembrandt’s pupils, including Isaak de Jouderville and Jan Victors, also used fanciful turbans in their biblical scenes. In portraits historiés they even provided the sitters with “Oriental” costumes. Examples in the show by Michiel de Musscher and Ferdinand Bol showing well-to-do citizens posing in such clothing before Persian carpets indicate the role of these items as status symbols.

The show also explores the global trade in exotic objects, which brought to the Netherlands porcelain and nautilus cups of the kind that were depicted in still lifes by Willem Kalf and Jan van der Heyden as evidence of a passion for collecting and cultural appropriation. Only a few works of art, however, document concrete encounters between West and East, such as the etching Portrait of Mehdi Quli Beg by Aegidius Sadeler II or the drawing Three Men with a Folio in an Office, which was formerly attributed to Cornelis
Visscher II. The fact that the wealth of the Dutch upper class was the result of violence and oppression in the Far East and came at high human cost—including Dutch sailors—was seldom given artistic expression. This aspect can at least be indirectly observed in generic battle scenes by Jacques Muller, Johannes Lingelbach, and Philips Wouwerman.

While the “Orient” was present in seventeenth-century Dutch townhouses in the form of exotic objects and clothing, and numerous accounts of journeys to the East were published, few artists of this period actually explored these distant countries themselves. Thus, the “Orient” and the “Oriental” remained constructs of set pieces, stereotypes, and imagination in Netherlandish visual culture of the time. Although foreign things were appreciated and incorporated into Dutch lifestyle, this was for the most part no more than a pose, since there was less real interest in other cultures than in their material manifestations and products, coveted for their preciousness and the associated prestige. The “meeting” of the East and the West did not take place on equal terms, nor was there a sense of an equal exchange. Foreignness represented an appealing contrast to the familiar, but it hardly aroused a more profound level of sympathy. This was no different in Rembrandt’s case than for his contemporaries, and this attitude—which this exhibition invites us to reflect upon—has not changed in large parts of the Western world. The show thus offers us the opportunity to more closely question this persistent Eurocentrism.

The more than fifty international lenders include the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden; the Prado, Madrid; the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; the National Gallery, London; and the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

An exhibition of the Museum Barberini, Potsdam, in collaboration with the Kunstmuseum Basel, under the patronage of His Excellency Wepke Kingma, Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Germany.

Due to the pandemic, the Potsdam venue of the exhibition, which had been planned for summer 2020, was postponed until spring 2021. The exhibition was shown in Basel from October 31, 2020, to February 14, 2021.
Turbans and Silk Robes: 
Bringing the “Orient” Home

The expansion of Dutch trade to other continents brought great fortune to some of the Republic’s burghers, and the increase in knowledge about the world and the availability of goods brought faraway lands closer, both intellectually and through physical objects. However, although distant travels were only possible for a very small part of the population, they were not a prerequisite for developing a relationship with the “Orient.” The presence of exotic objects influenced lifestyles, fashions, and even painting in the Netherlands. Motifs with origins in foreign cultures began to appear in genre paintings, portraits, and portraits historiés, in which figures assumed the role of biblical or historical personages. These motifs were status symbols that articulated social standing and wealth.

Paths to Prosperity: 
Trade and War

The global trade networks developed by the Dutch in the seventeenth century provided a foundation for their interest in faraway lands and made exotic objects available. Visual representations of trade were not documentary in character; they made no claim to faithfully reproduce scenes 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 military conflicts. Paintings of this era never show the actual circumstances of the Dutch Republic’s wealth.

The Landscape of the Bible: 
Early Rembrandt and His Influences

Books on foreign cultures and reports by pilgrims and travelers returning from expeditions to the countries of the Levant and Asia were readily available in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century. However, very few Dutch had actually seen these countries with their own eyes or had any idea of the prevailing conditions there. For most, the “Orient” was the place where the events of the Bible had occurred. Rembrandt and his teachers set 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 plains of the northern Netherlands. The artists populated these scenes 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.
Understanding the World:
Collections and Research

The spread of trade to all continents fostered greater knowledge of the world and a broadening of learning in the Netherlands. A plethora of books and maps were released that gave readers access to faraway lands. Amsterdam became a center of publishing. Portraits of scholars with books highlighted the idealization of learning that had emerged 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 took on various forms, some of which were superficial and—as exemplified by attitudes toward Islam—marked by intolerance. There are only a few instances of documented correspondence between scholars from different countries.

True to Life?
Or Mere Convention?

Exotic costumes and settings were used to create an atmospheric backdrop for biblical narratives. How true to reality these motifs were was of little concern. Landscapes and portraits, which sought to represent a real place or person, were a different matter. However, only a few seventeenth-century Netherlandish paintings 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 peoples. Many works simply confirmed existing clichés and stereotypes. Original artworks such as miniatures from India and Persia were given scant attention. They were rarely collected, and only a small number of Dutch painters—including Rembrandt—studied them in any greater detail.

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. In such scenes, representing the stable in Bethlehem or a temple, exotic motifs including 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 took place.
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. In addition to enhancing the impression of spatial depth, they emphasized the staging of the mystical.

**Familiarizing the Exotic:**
**Rembrandt’s Adaptation of the “Orient”**

The popular practice of exoticizing settings was applied to biblical scenes, still lifes of outlandish objects, and portrait studies known as *tronies*, which are not individual likenesses, but rather character studies that often entail role play. The lavish opulence of the clothing and precious items contrasted starkly with the puritanical 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 projection surface for personal desires that had no place in the rationalistic worldview of the West, as epitomized by Protestantism.
In Dutch Art of the seventeenth century we find many motifs that were called “Oriental” in those days. What was the social and intellectual background of paintings with exotic shells, porcelain, or men with turbans?

To Dutch people in Rembrandt's time, the Near and Far East were a blend of stories, objects, and pictures. The stories were dramatic, full of disasters and sickness at sea, capture by pirates, fights with the British and the Portuguese, contact with strange peoples. They were told by sailors and soldiers and merchants who came back to Holland from the East, and you could read them in bestselling books of real-life adventure. Strange to say, these stories never found their way into Dutch paintings.

What did get into the paintings were objects from the East. Sailors would bring back natural objects like shells, coral, and rare minerals; feathers, horns, armadillos, butterflies, even living parrots. Weapons were a favorite collectible. Sophisticated collectors could vie for carvings, lacquer boxes, tapestries, ivory and alabaster reliefs, manuscripts and miniatures.

These were objects of private trade. Much larger were the imports landed in Dutch harbors by the Dutch East India Company: cloves and nutmeg, silver and silk, porcelain and pepper; carpets and clothing. The variety and volume of goods available in Amsterdam was greater than anywhere else in Europe. By mid-century there was not a home in the Netherlands without a touch of the exotic. If it was not a Turkey carpet on the table it could have been a mounted shell, a shawl of Indian chintz, or a bowl of Chinese porcelain. These accessories found their way into still-life paintings, sometimes just to show them off and sometimes as pious reminders that all is vanity. But they also come into portraits, especially of merchants and Company officials who made their name in the Orient. We see them not only as goods in the households of portrait sitters and the boardrooms of civic groups. In a special kind of portrait, a couple or a family would dress up as Orientals, sometimes with the identity of a biblical figure. And that brings us to the biggest category of all in which the orient infiltrated the imagery of Dutch art. With the thought in mind that the stories in the Bible took place in the Near East, artists would dress figures from the Old and New Testament in clothing meant to look Oriental. There was nothing very authentic or profound about this. The only piece of symbolism involved is that turbans were put on the heads only of Jewish or pagan characters, never of Christians.

The exhibition is called “Rembrandt's Orient.” What was the specific role he played in the seventeenth-century image of “the Orient”?

The first Dutch artist to practice this kind of Orientalism in his Bible paintings was the Amsterdam artist Pieter Lastman. Lastman had spent several years in Italy, where, especially in Venice, he was close to images of the Orient in Italian art. Fascinated by their
bright colors and exotic forms, when he came home he dressed his biblical figures in Eastern garb. And as chance would have it, Lastman became Rembrandt's teacher, exercising a lifelong influence on him. Nearly all the biblical subjects Rembrandt painted had first been put into pictures by Lastman. As Rembrandt's star rose, and as the number of his paintings in collections and the market exceeded those of Lastman, he became associated with the Oriental look. He employed it not only in Bible paintings but also in some of his tronies — paintings of studio models as a type of humanity. Most strikingly of all, Rembrandt even painted and etched himself as an Oriental. And so the Oriental look merged with the Rembrandt look. When pupils of Rembrandt and admirers of his art outside his studio put motifs like this into their work, people would say, “Aha, that's a Rembrandt touch,” so his fame contributed to the spread of Orientalism.

That was what we could call the conventional aspect of Rembrandt's involvement with Oriental imagery. But he also carried out an entirely unique project, the only one of its kind in the entire seventeenth century. In the 1650s or 1660s he made twenty-five copies of precious drawings that had been imported in one way or another from the Mughal Empire in India. The originals were portraits of emperors or court personages. None of his actual models has been found, except perhaps for two. But we know what they looked like. They were brightly colored decorative drawings with drawn frames on a dyed sheet of paper. Rembrandt's copies are in black or brownish ink on untreated Asian paper of a kind he never otherwise used for drawings. They concentrate on the figures and some items of clothing. In contrast to his paintings with inauthentic Oriental attributes, which were known and copied widely, these very authentic images remained unknown after he made them. So we can speak of two sides to Rembrandt's Orientalism, that in the catalog to the exhibition I call “Convention” — which was very popular — and “Uniqueness,” which was really reserved for him alone.

You have been working on this exhibition for years. What does it mean to you that it is now realized in Potsdam?

Rembrandt is one of the most many-sided artists who ever lived. He was interested in everything, so that everyone who studies him will tend to gravitate to the sides of his art that interest them the most or that cross their path at a given moment. My attention to his Oriental imagery was sparked, I must admit, by three outside circumstances, all around the year 2010. One was a discovery by a fellow scholar, a curator in the Rijksmuseum; the second a coincidental event in the National Museum in Prague; and the third a suggestion by a journalist who is also an art historian.

In 2009 I was a fellow at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies, in a working group investigating the spread of Dutch art in Asia. My subject was Dutch artists in Persia, which touched only incidentally on Rembrandt. But we invited curators from the
Rijksmuseum to hear about their contributions to the theme. One of them was Jan de Hond. He told us about a poem written in the mid-1650s in praise of Indian painting, which was called the art of the Benjans. The author was Willem Schellinks, who was also an artist. And it turned out that Schellinks knew exactly one of the same drawings that Rembrandt copied, so that both of them must have had contact with each other and the owner of the drawing. This stimulated not only my interest but also my competitiveness. A copy of the rare book in which the poem was printed I have owned for more than twenty years, and I had not looked into it well enough. The feeling of regret and of a missed chance is a powerful stimulus, I can tell you. So when I was invited in 2010 to lecture at an exhibition of Dutch art in Prague the next year and saw that the poster image was the painting in the Rijksmuseum of a man in a turban, I gave my talk the title “Moors, Turks, Persians, and Benjans: Rembrandt’s Orientals.” Then came a very specific incentive. I was invited to speak to the press when a Rembrandt painting of a man in a turban in the private collection of Ilone and George Kremer was lent to the Rembrandt House Museum. After my remarks on Rembrandt’s interest in this theme, one of the journalists, Erik Spaans, said to me, “If this subject is so interesting, why don’t you make an exhibition on it?” After that, Erik Spaans broached the idea to Michael Philipp, now chief curator of Museum Barberini, and the results are before you.

The catalog of the exhibition in Museum Barberini, I am proud to say, has essays by Jan de Hond and Erik Spaans, and in the exhibition you will see a key painting by Willem Schellinks and the man in a turban from the Kremer collection. I wish to tell you this to underline what a great role is played by chance in our lives, even our professional lives, but also how important it is to hold onto stimuli, connections, people, and works of art that matter to you.

You can find a video of the interview on our website.
**Running time:** March 13 to June 27, 2021

**Exhibited Works:** 110 works, including paintings, drawings, prints, books, and thirty-three works by Rembrandt, of which ten are paintings (including works with workshop participation and from the circle of Rembrandt), four drawings, and nineteen etchings; as well as paintings by Ferdinand Bol, Benjamin Gerritsz Cuyp, Caesar van Everdingen, Govert Flinck, Arent de Gelder, Jan van der Heyden, Isaac de Jouoderville, Willem Kalf, Salomon Koninck, Pieter Lastman, Jan Lievens, Nicolaes Maes, Jan Steen, Wallerant Vaillant, Jan Victors, Thomas Wijck, and Philips Wouwerman

**Curators:** Dr. Michael Philipp, Museum Barberini; Gary Schwartz, guest curator

**Lenders:** Over fifty lenders, including the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham; Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Kunstmuseum des Landes Niedersachsen, Braunschweig; Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest; Statens Museum for Kunst – National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen; Gemaldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden; Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf; The British Museum, London; The National Gallery, London; The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid; Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid; Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek, Munich; Mauritshuis, The Hague; Albertina, Vienna; Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna; The Earl of Derby; The Kremer Collection; Natan Saban Collection, Israel.

**Gallery Space:** Ca. 1,000 square meters / first floor and second floor

**Exhibition Design:** Gunther Maria Kolck, Hamburg, and BrücknerAping, Büro für Gestaltung, Bremen

**Adress:** Museum Barberini, Alter Markt, Humboldtstraße 5–6, 14467 Potsdam

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**Rembrandt's Orient** Facts and Figures
Opening Hours:  
(Please verify opening times on our website.)
Daily except Tuesdays: 10 a.m.–7 p.m., first Thursday each month: 10 a.m.–9 p.m.,
Monday and Wednesday–Friday for kindergartens and schools (by appointment only): 9–10 a.m.

Visiting the Museum:  
The health of the visitors and employees of the Museum Barberini is our first priority. To make your visit as comfortable and safe as possible, we have developed comprehensive protection and hygiene measures that closely follow the May 2020 recommendations of the state of Brandenburg and the city of Potsdam; these regulations will apply after the current lockdown has ended. Precautionary measures for infection control include limiting the number of visitors, regulating entrance times by means of timed tickets that are only available online, optimizing visitor flow in the museum, and increasing the number of disinfection stations.

Admission and Tickets:  
(Please verify opening times on our website.)
Monday, Wednesday–Friday €16 / €10, Saturday/Sunday €18 / €10; free admission for children under eighteen and secondary-school pupils; admission is possible only with a timed ticket.
After the Museum Barberini has reopened, we will only be able to offer a limited number of tickets. Admission to the current exhibitions is only possible for visitors in possession of a timed ticket; this also applies to Barberini Friends and ICOM members: www.museum-barberini.de.

Social Media:  
#RembrandtBarberini at #MuseumBarberini on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube
Barberini Digital: The Barberini App is your personal companion before, during, and after your visit to the museum. It offers audio tours for adults and children, service information, event recommendations, e-tickets, and video interviews with specialists. It can be downloaded for free on App Store and on Google Play.

Barberini Prolog is a good way to prepare yourself for the exhibition. A compact, multimedia website, Prolog gives an overview of topics and works and is useful for planning your museum visit or for recommending the show to others: prolog.museum-barberini.com.

Conversations with Experts: How did the painters of the Dutch Golden Age react to the regions of the Middle and Far East that they experienced through trade, travel, and publications? You can learn more on our website and the Barberini App in video interviews with international Rembrandt experts including Gary Schwartz, the guest curator of the exhibition; Michael Philipp, Museum Barberini; Jan de Hond, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; Arnoud Vrolijk, University Library, Leiden; Roelof van Gelder, historian, Amsterdam; and Erik Spaans, journalist and art historian.

Rembrandt Today: A five-part conversation series by exhibition curator Michael Philipp looks at current aspects of Eurocentrism. Each conversation begins with a work of art to more closely examine topical issues regarding Orientalism, globalization, and identity. The conversation partners are Stephanie Archangel, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; Tahir Della, Initiative for Black People in Germany; Renata Motta, Free University, Berlin; Anna von Rath, Postcolonial Potsdam; and Kadir Sanci, University of Potsdam.

360-Degree Tour: The 360-Degree Tour enables users to virtually explore the exhibition Rembrandt’s Orient (starting March 20, 2021) and the Hasso Plattner Collection (already online) at the Museum Barberini. You can navigate between galleries and use the zoom function to explore details of each painting.
Events and Education Program
A varied educational program for all interests and age groups enhances the inspiring art experience at the Museum Barberini. For the moment all events are held online, including talks, lectures, and tours. Please refer to our website for updates and news on our events and education program: museum-barberini.de.

Barberini Live Tours: For anyone who is unable to come to Potsdam but does not want to miss out on the exhibition at the Museum Barberini, we offer virtual tours of the exhibition with an experienced guide. Using the 360-Degree Tour technology, your guide will present the current exhibition or the Hasso Plattner Collection with its Impressionist paintings. The virtual tour allows visitors to enjoy the individual paintings as well as the atmosphere of the exhibition rooms and thematic groupings of paintings. Daily tours can be booked on our website and tours for groups of up to two hundred participants can be requested at our service office: live_tour@museum-barberini.de, +49 331 236014–499.
Rembrandt’s Orient: West Meets East in Dutch Art of the Seventeenth Century

Edited by Bodo Brinkmann, Gabriel Dette, Michael Philipp, and Ortrud Westheider
With contributions by Bodo Brinkmann, Jan de Hond, Gabriel Dette, Corinna Forberg, Susanne Henriette Karau, Michael Philipp, Gary Schwartz, Erik Spaans, Jolanta Talbierska, Roelof van Gelder, and Arnoud Vrolijk

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Contents:

- “The Fascination of the East: Trade and Art in the Netherlands in the Seventeenth Century” (Erik Spaans)
- “Utterly Artless’ or ‘Exceedingly Noble’: Ottoman, Mughal, and Safavid Art in the Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries” (Jan de Hond)
- “Convention and Uniqueness: Rembrandt’s Response to the East” (Gary Schwartz)
- “The Fear of Barbary Pirates: Privateers and Christian Slaves in the Seventeenth Century” (Roelof van Gelder)
- “Knowledge from the East: Collecting Oriental Manuscripts in the Dutch Republic in the Age of Rembrandt” (Arnoud Vrolijk)
- Catalog of exhibited works, with contributions by Bodo Brinkmann, Jan de Hond, Gabriel Dette, Corinna Forberg, Susanne Henriette Karau, Michael Philipp, Gary Schwartz, and Jolanta Talbierskarska
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Dirck van Loonen
Assueer Jacob Schimmelpenninck van der Oye (1631–1673) with Servant and Dog, 1660
Oil on canvas, 224 x 185 cm
© Stichting Duivenvoorde, Voorschoten

J. F. F. after Andries Beeckman
The Marketplace of Batavia, after 1688
Oil on canvas, 144 x 209 cm
© Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam

Ferdinand Bol
Couple in a Landscape, ca. 1647–50
Oil on canvas, 103.2 x 91.8 cm
© Dordrechts Museum, loan of the Cultural Heritage Agency 1948
Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn
*David with the Head of Goliath before Saul*, 1627
Oil on oak panel, 27.4 x 39.7 cm
© Kunstmuseum Basel, Max Geldner Bequest, Basel

Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn
*Self-Portrait with Raised Sabre*, 1634
Etching, with touches of burin, 12.4 x 10.2 cm
© Kunstmuseum Basel, Kupferstichkabinett, Donation Eberhard W. Kornfeld, Bern

Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn
*Daniel and Cyrus before the Idol Bel*, 1633
Oil on panel, 23.5 x 30.2 cm
© The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn
*Bust of an Old Man with Turban*, ca. 1627–29
Oil on oak panel, 26.7 x 20.3 cm
© The Kremer Collection
Thomas Wijck
*Traders with Goods in a Levantine Harbor, ca. 1660–70*
Oil on canvas, 108 x 87 cm
© Musée Fabre, Montpellier

Pieter Lastman
*Jephthah and His Daughter, 1611*
Oil on panel, 122.5 x 200 cm
© Kunst Museum Winterthur,
Donation of the Jakob Briner Foundation, 2018

Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn
*Samson Proposing the Riddle at the Wedding Feast, 1638*
Oil on canvas, 126 x 175 cm
© Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister,
Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden
Impressionism in Russia: Dawn of the Avant-Garde
August 28, 2021, to January 9, 2022

This exhibition at the Museum Barberini is dedicated to the reception of French painting in Russia, a subject that has received little attention to date. With over eighty works—by artists from Ilia Repin to Kazimir Malevich—the show reveals the extent of their international visual vocabulary around 1900.

As the leading art metropolis in Europe, Paris attracted painters from the academies of Moscow and St. Petersburg starting in the 1860s. Through their examination of the Impressionist style of painting modern life, they liberated themselves from the academic rules that governed Realist painting in Russia. Interaction with French painting inspired artists such as Ilia Repin, Konstantin Korovin, and Valentin Serov to produce works that in addition to the impression of the present moment also showed a sensory world that confronted modern life. Electric lights, shopwindow displays, and the architecture of the modern boulevards offered them motifs that they treated with great painterly freedom.

The practice of painting outdoors that was inspired by the Impressionists transformed Russian art and made landscapes popular. Repin, Vasily Polenov, and their pupils Korovin and Serov explored nature around Moscow and traveled to the expanses of the north. Painting en plein air and a sketch-like style led artists to motifs that expressed a zest for life, encouraging a shift away from the existential subjects of Russian art. Artists captured the carelessness of modern recreational activities in Instructional interiors that are suffused with light. Studies of light effects in indoor scenes, some of which are in dachas, and in still lifes led to a new appreciation of these genres that were little esteemed at the academy in Moscow. In portraits and pictures of families, Russian artists linked candor with psychological depth to create their own style of Impressionism. Questions of national identity were just as important as the relationship to the tradition of Realism in painting.

A second generation of Russian artists in Paris at the beginning of the twentieth century became acquainted with Post-Impressionism and Fauvism, painting styles that experimented with bright, unmixed colors. Landscape painting became the first field of experimentation for artists such as Mikhail Larionov, Natalia Goncharova, and Kazimir Malevich. They considered themselves Impressionists before founding the Russian avant-garde with expressive Rayonism and nonrepresentational Suprematism after 1910. Now that color had been liberated, painters found the energy that stood for the dynamism and renewal of a new age. Impressionist observation was transformed by the Cubist and Futurist practice of breaking down surfaces and made absolute as luminous nothingness in Malevich’s series White on White.
The exhibition includes over eighty loans from institutions such as ABA Gallery in New York, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid, the Collection of Iveta and Tamaz Manasherov in Moscow, the Collection of Vladimir Tsarenkov in London, the State Tretyakov Gallery, the State Museum of Fine Arts of the Republic of Tatarstan in Kazan, the Collection of Elsina Khayrova in London, and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam as well as from private collections.

An exhibition of the Museum Barberini, Potsdam, and the Museum Frieder Burda in Baden-Baden, in collaboration with the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. The exhibition was planned to be shown first at the Museum Barberini in Potsdam, from November 7, 2020, to February 14, 2021, and then subsequently at the Frieder Burda Museum. Following the announcement of the lockdown on October 30 by the state of Brandenburg as a cautionary measure to prevent the spread of the corona pandemic, the Museum Barberini remained closed during the scheduled run of the exhibition. In consultation with the lenders, the exhibition will return to the Museum Barberini from August 28, 2021, to January 9, 2022.