



# TURNING HEADS

## BRUEGEL, RUBENS AND REMBRANDT

ROYAL MUSEUM OF FINE  
ARTS ANTWERP (KMSKA)  
20.10.23 - 21.01.24

### Curators

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& dr. Koen Bulckens (KMSKA)

KMSKA

This exhibition is a collaboration between the KMSKA and the National Gallery of Ireland.





Faces are very much in the spotlight at the KMSKA this autumn. Our first major exhibition after the museum's grand reopening focuses on the development of a new genre, the head study. Interest in the *tronie*, the old Dutch word for 'face' surged in the 17th century, when artists like Rubens, Rembrandt and Vermeer poured their talent into painting the human face. The results are often small, but stunningly painted, drawn or engraved: intimate works that bring us closer to the artist than ever. Never before has the genre been covered so comprehensively. *Turning Heads* at the KMSKA brings together no fewer than 76 of the most eloquent masterpieces from Belgian and international collections.

Artists in the 16th and 17th centuries were responsible for a seismic upheaval. Faces had previously been the preserve of crowded biblical and mythological scenes. Now, however, they were shown individually and in all their glory. They were played with, studied and livened up with costumes and exaggerated expressions.

*Turning Heads* is not an exhibition about portraits. In fact, it is very much *not* that. Artists like Rubens, Rembrandt and Vermeer used anonymous models to carry out creative experiments on their own initiative. Models who did not have to be recognizable. Who gave up their 'image rights' as it were and did not require to be named. Those are the kind of heads we are showing in the exhibition. Entirely ordinary people, just like you and me. Whose faces tell their own story.

*Turning Heads* allows visitors to follow the genre's evolution through five themed strands. Beginning with a 15th-century prelude and concluding with a final few 19th-century holdovers, while mainly focusing on art from the 17th century. Rubens and Rembrandt are our guides and crop up constantly throughout the exhibition.

## PRELUDE

Interest in faces did not come out of the blue – it can be seen from as early as the 15th century. Old masters painted stories, particularly ones from the Bible and mythology, also known as 'history scenes'. Artists like Leonardo da Vinci became increasingly fascinated by the way people differ from one another physically. They realized that faces provided an ideal canvas on which to bring their narratives to life. The figures in their paintings express a wide range of emotions in extremely vivid ways.

This led to works filled exclusively with heads. *Turning Heads* shows two similar paintings for the first time that showcase this approach: *Christ Carrying the Cross* by a follower of Jheronymus Bosch (c. 1450–1516) and *Jesus among the Doctors* by Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528). The latter work rarely leaves its home in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid.



*Christ Carrying the Cross*



*Jesus among the Doctors*

It is especially striking how the most important Christian figures like Jesus and Mary embody ideals of beauty approaching perfection, while the bad guys are given a less flattering if not downright stereotypical physiognomy. Dürer also shows an interest, however, in the correct proportions of the head. In his study diagrams, he carefully recorded the almost infinite variety of nose lengths, chin shapes and foreheads. *Turning Heads* presents Dürer alongside other pre-scientific studies of the head.

## STUDY HEADS

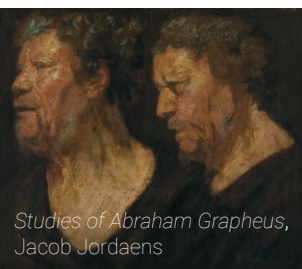
Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) and his Southern Netherlandish contemporaries grew up with the heads painted by their predecessors. Those like Rubens who completed their training in Italy, moreover, were also introduced to the study heads produced in Italian studios, in which artists captured the faces of anonymous models from a variety of angles in drawings, oil sketches and paintings. The expression of these models was customarily neutral.

Working in this way served two different purposes: first of all, heads drawn from life could be put together as required in a kind of ingenious jigsaw puzzle. They were assigned the appropriate emotions and costume depending on which character they were supposed to represent. For the Virgin Mary, for instance, this could mean a sad expression and a distinctive blue cloak. Rubens and his contemporaries also combined this stock of available models on sheets with multiple drawings. The second use of the different heads was to help train the endless flow of aspiring artists who came to learn the trade from Rubens and his contemporaries.



*Head of an Old Woman,*  
Peter Paul Rubens





*Turning Heads* brings together the very finest examples to illustrate this kind of studio collaboration. Although these works served a practical purpose, the quality of their execution was anything but rudimentary. They bring us very close to the individual artists and how they viewed people in what are often sophisticated non-portraits. Some are painted in such a lifelike way that they seem almost like photographs or like photos with an oil painting filter applied.

A particular case highlighted in *Turning Heads* is that of Abraham Grapheus (1545/50–1624). He was a valued member of the Guild of St Luke, the professional association to which Antwerp's painters belonged, and a popular model, whose name for once we do actually know. For the exhibition, the KMSKA has grouped several different versions of Grapheus' face, as studied by a variety of painters.

## COSTUMED

The Twelve Years' Truce (1609–21) saw a brief period of peace in the war between the Spanish Netherlands and the breakaway Dutch Republic. Artists took the opportunity to pop over the border to visit their colleagues. Rubens, for instance, travelled to Holland twice, while Frans Hals (1582–1666) visited Antwerp in 1616. The Dutch masters who made the trip south saw the striking head studies there, prompting ideas of their own. The market for religious scenes in the north collapsed following the rise of Protestantism. The focus now was much more on individual people and their everyday activities. Hals, Rembrandt, Vermeer and others all got creative with their images of faces, turning what had been a practical activity into a new genre, the *tronie*, which they swiftly propelled into a remarkable high point in the history of art.

Costumes frequently offer vital clues as to a person's job or where they came from. They say less about who someone is and more about what they represent. Pieter Bruegel the Elder was creating individual faces, mostly of peasants, as early as the 16th century, while Quentin Massijs later contributed his satirical 'double portraits'.



Artists' depictions of ordinary people became notably more generous in the 17th century. Colourfully printed fabrics from other parts of the world triggered the imagination of Rubens and Rembrandt alike. They dressed up their models in turbans and robes that evoke exotic locales, without alluding to a specific time or place. With the exception, that is, of the *Study for Balthazar* from the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. Rubens might have painted this head study of a dignified black man from life, in which case the turban will have been as actually worn.

## EXPRESSION



Different facial expressions are another way to achieve variety. With 42 separate muscles in our faces, human beings can express our feelings with incredible nuance. It means that a face can speak without having to use words. Artists showed immense curiosity in their exploration of basic emotions such as joy, fear, anger and sadness. The idea arose in the 17th century that viewers experience the same emotions themselves. A cheerful face would make you happy, for instance, while a crying face would make you sad. *Turning Heads* puts this idea to the test. Frans Hals, that master of expression, certainly knew how to move us with no more than a display of spontaneous joy. Yet there is also an element of childlike pride and mischief in the *Laughing Boy* too. The painting's loose but brilliant brushwork emphasizes the fleeting moment. It is hard not to smile.

Other artists pursued more extreme expressions – facial gymnastics intended to illustrate their technical skills. Both Adriaen Brouwer (1605–1638) and Joos van Craesbeeck (1625–1660) were interested in more three-dimensional mimicry. Brouwer used a bitter drink, for instance, to show a man's face puckering up. Van Craesbeeck, meanwhile, painted a subject blowing smoke rings, in whose face every single muscle seems to have been activated. Franz Xaver Messerschmidt (1736–1783) later went a step further: his head sculptures consist entirely of hyperintense expression.



*The Bitter Potion*,  
Adriaen Brouwer



*The Smoker*,  
Joos van Craesbeeck



Franz Xaver  
Messerschmidt

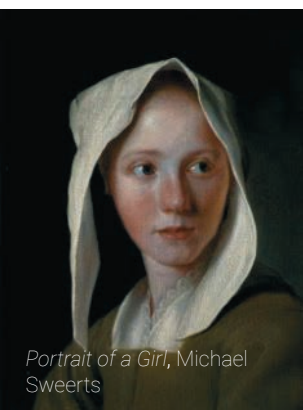
## LIGHT AND SHADE



*Girl in Profile*, Jan Lievens

Light is one of the most important facets of a work of art. Interest in the physical properties of light grew in the 17th century, among artists as well. But how do you go about painting light in a tangible way? Here too, the face offered an answer. Artists treated the human head as the ideal projection screen. They played with both light and shade to lend character or volume to a face. The fascination for faces coincided with that for light.

Dutch face studies or *tronies* have often been referred to as 'studies in light'. Rembrandt and Vermeer are both known for their mastery in this regard, but Jan Lievens (1607–1674), who worked with Rembrandt in Leiden for five years, was no less adept in his use of refined nuances of light. His *Girl in Profile* seems positively to glow in the sunshine.



Portrait of a Girl, Michael Sweerts

*Turning Heads* focuses on another element too, which has not received sufficient exposure. Seventeenth-century artists in the Southern Netherlands were equally aware of the possibilities offered by light. Rubens, for instance, deliberately used candle or daylight to illuminate models, while Jacob Jordaens (1593–1678) developed a language of his own in which to describe light. For his part, Michael Sweerts (1618–1664) could do magical things with a very soft light reminiscent of Vermeer.

*Girl with a Red Hat* (National Gallery of Art, Washington), one of Vermeer's smallest works, synthesizes everything *Turning Heads* is about. In it, the light dances over a hat with exotic feathers, while the girl's expression is mysterious and inviting.

## EXPERIENCING FACES

The human face is ubiquitous, whether in adverts, selfies or on TikTok. It feels as if we have always been surrounded by faces, but nothing could be further from the truth. Getting here was a long journey. *Turning Heads* takes visitors on an amazing trip back through time to the 16th and 17th centuries, in a one-to-one, personal and intimate encounter with individuals bursting with character.

At the same time, KMSKA is convinced that a hands-on approach encourages different ways of looking. Which is why visitors will get the chance to unleash their inner artist by making digital face studies of their own. Complete with unusual headgear, funny expressions or powerful lighting effects. In between the galleries, that is, to give a moment's pause. In addition to this interactive and recurring journey of discovery, *Turning Heads* reaches out to the active visitor with even more experiences, digital and analogue alike, that further explore the theme of the exhibition and bring it bang up to date.

## CATALOGUE

The accompanying catalogue in Dutch, French, English and German editions elaborates on the exhibition themes. Besides the descriptions of each exhibited work, it features accessible essays by a number of experts who place the development of the genre in context. There are five shorter pieces too, in which contemporary artists reflect on the meaning of the face, both past and present.

Principal essays and designated authors (titles subject to change):

1. *Introduction*, Dr Nico Van Hout and Dr Koen Bulckens, KMSKA
2. *The head in history painting*, Prof Michael W. Kwakkelstein, Utrecht University
3. *Studying faces*, Dr Nico Van Hout, KMSKA
4. *Costumed*, Dr Lizzie Marx, National Gallery of Ireland
5. *Expression*, Dr Friederike Schütt, Städel Museum Frankfurt
6. *Light and shade*, Dr Koen Bulckens, KMSKA

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This exhibition is a collaboration between the KMSKA and the National Gallery of Ireland. Upon the exhibition's conclusion at the KMSKA, it will travel on to Dublin (24.02.2024 - 26.05.2024).

## PRESS

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