

Sex, Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll in Rembrandt's Time

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1. The Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century

Was Rembrandt queer?

In the below painting of Rembrandt in his early twenties, the attributed artist, Isaac de Jouderville, depicted him bushy-haired, wearing a striped scarf wrapped around his neck, and accessorized with a glittery pendant hanging from a golden chain. In his right ear dangles a golden earring. According to early seventeenth-century norms, men flaunting jewelry like chains and earrings defied contemporary norms of masculinity and were considered effeminate.

Less than a hundred meters from my desk is Rozengracht 184, the last residence in Amsterdam where Rembrandt lived. In the seventeenth century, the Rozengracht ('Rose canal') was teeming with barges and boats. Today the building stands along a congested thruway (the canal was filled in the late nineteenth century) bustling with streetcars, automobiles, and cyclists. The second-floor window is marked with a plaque commemorating the painter's last home. If Rembrandt were alive today, he would probably look out and see trendy young people lining up for the hot yoga studio and boutique indoor cycling gym across the street. Downstairs before entering his building, he would have to pass by 'Antiek Tattoo', where teenagers and twenty-something-year-olds anxiously line up for tattoos. Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012) boldly express themselves with tattoos of angels, hearts, or meandering vines or reptiles. Just like Rembrandt many of them moved to Amsterdam in their late teens or early twenties. The painter left his hometown of Leiden and sought his fame and fortune in Amsterdam when he was around 22 years old. I cannot help but imagine that if Rembrandt was a young man living in Amsterdam today, he would probably be one of the bare-chested tattooed young men taking hot yoga classes at 36 °C. If having a tattoo is



Possibly Isaac de Jouderville, copy of a self-portrait of a young Rembrandt c. 1630 (Cleveland Museum of Art).

an expression of modern youth culture, then how did Rembrandt and his contemporaries in the early seventeenth century express themselves? In de Jouderville's copy of Rembrandt's self-portrait, there is no evidence of a tattoo on his body, but Rembrandt who was in his early twenties at the time visibly distanced himself from the older generation with his unkept hair and golden earring.¹

¹ Isaac de Jouderville (1612-1648), who was Rembrandt's second apprentice, copied the artist's self-portrait circa 1629 and depicted him wearing a golden earring in his right ear. *A Bust of a Young Man*, Cleveland Museum of Art. Rembrandt's

If anything, the young man in the portrait today might identify as 'Questioning' or even 'Queer' and feel more at home with the LGBTQIA+ community. According to a 2021 worldwide LGBTQ+ report, approximately 11% of the Dutch population identify as homosexual, bisexual, or pansexual; while Generation Z are more openly gay, bisexual, asexual or pansexual, Millennials (born 1981-1996) and Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980) are the next likely, and Baby boomers (born 1946-1964) the least likely to identify as openly gay. In addition, 1.2% of the world population are Intersex (born with both male and female genitals), just as frequently as being born with red hair. For the seventeenth century, it is hard to imagine that homosexuality and others who today might identify with the LGBTQIA+ community did not exist, which is reason to question if Rembrandt's new hairstyle in the 1620s was not the only feature of his generation that challenged and deviated from prevailing norms of society. Today in the Netherlands, young people in their late teens and early twenties are not only openly expressing their sexuality, but they also enjoy leisure time drinking and dancing at live outdoor concerts that last for days. In 2023, at the popular Lowlands Festival, which was attended by 65,000, many camped in tents on the sight, and during the three-day event, joints, XTC, or ketamine, were standard fare. In Amsterdam, approximately 18% of the students recreationally take cocaine, GHB, or 3-MMC when they go to dance events and parties, giving them euphoric and mind-altering experiences. Today, people experiment with stimulating drugs, especially when they are young, but was that also the case for young people in Rembrandt's youth during the 1620s and 1630s, when the Republic's economy was booming, and the growing middle class had more disposable income for their children and youngsters? How did Rembrandt's generation of young people express themselves differently from their parents, and how did they fit in and belong with their age cohorts?

1629 *Self-Portrait with Plumed Beret* in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum of Boston, also features a hint of a golden earring in the master's right ear.