

AUGUST 13, 2021

# REMBRANDT VAN RIJN CANADA'S CONTEMPORARY LENS ON THE DUTCH OLD MASTER

*The National Gallery of Canada's new exhibition on Rembrandt is the first major show of the revered painter's work to go on display in this country since 1969—and the first to connect the Dutch Republic of Rembrandt's time and seventeenth-century Turtle Island.*



Kent Monkman, *The Triumph of Mischief*, 2007, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.



Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-portrait Wearing a Hat and Two Chains*, c.1642–43, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.

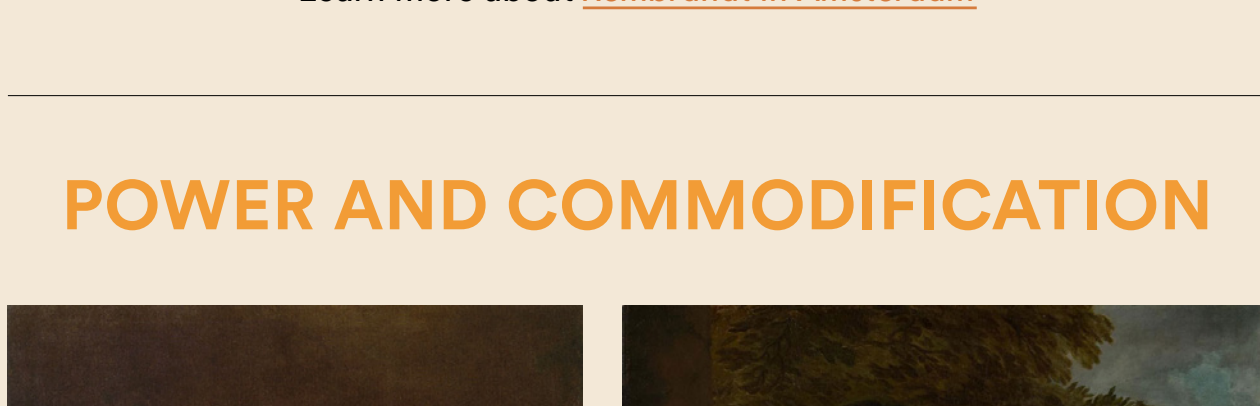


"Too often we see the world through one frame," Sasha Suda, Director and CEO of the National Gallery of Canada (and ACI contributor), recently told me, referring to the current NGC show *Rembrandt in Amsterdam: Creativity and Competition*. "The exhibition reveals the limitless connections of art," she added, explaining how it brings this country's visual culture in dialogue with the past in meaningful and unanticipated ways. Curated by Stephanie Dickey, *Rembrandt in Amsterdam* considers the iconic European painter Rembrandt (1606–1669) in relation to the rapaciousness of the Dutch Republic's global colonial enterprise and its impact on Turtle Island (North America). The exhibition shines unprecedented light on the career of the seventeenth-century painter by looking at what he created alongside works by Indigenous and Black artists based in Canada. Wall texts by Black feminist art historian [Joana Joachim](#) and Plains Cree curator, artist, and ACI author [Gerald McMaster](#) explore the histories of Indigenous and Black populations during Rembrandt's time. From everyone at the ACI, we hope that the following selections inspire you to make the trip to the National Gallery of Canada where the history of art offers lessons for the present.

**Sara Angel**

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

## THE REMBRANDT-TURTLE ISLAND CONNECTION

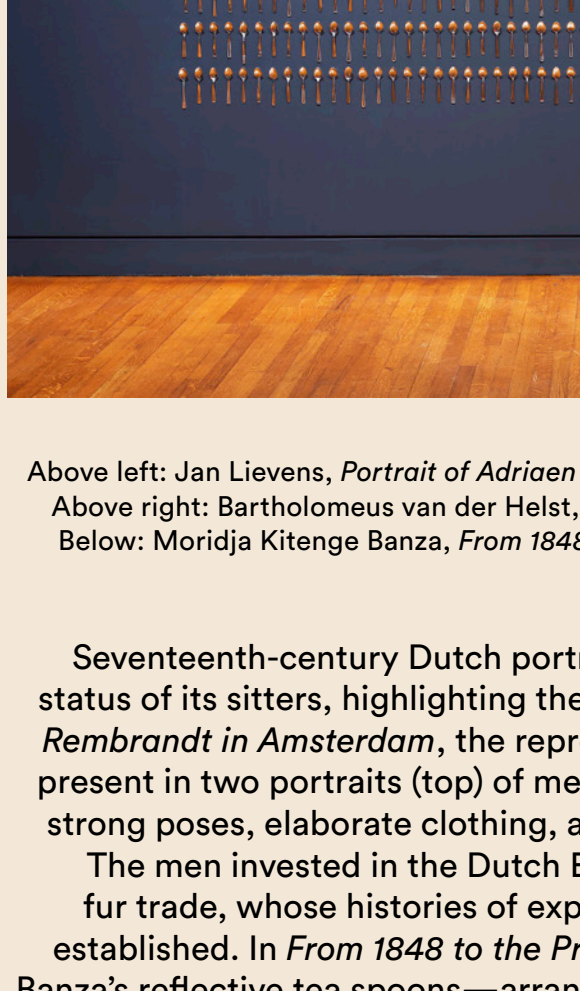


Samuel de Champlain, "The Defeat of the Iroquois at Lake Champlain," 1613, from *The Voyages* (1613), Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, New Haven.

Rembrandt van Rijn is regarded as the foremost painter of the so-called Dutch Golden Age, which saw the Dutch Republic rise to the forefront within the realms of art, trade, science, and the military in the seventeenth century. In *Rembrandt in Amsterdam*, Gerald McMaster notes that the preeminent artist's birth in 1606 (in Leiden) occurred in the same year that the Dutch landed on Turtle Island and first encountered the Haudenosaunee people in what is now New York. Two years later, the explorer Samuel de Champlain founded the first French settlement at Quebec. His drawing (above right) from 1613 documents a 1609 battle between the French and a group of Haudenosaunee that sparked a lasting rivalry which continued decades after Rembrandt settled in Amsterdam from 1632 onward. There the renowned portraitist and history painter produced canvases that reflect his intense direct observation of people, objects, light, and atmosphere.

Learn more about [Rembrandt in Amsterdam](#)

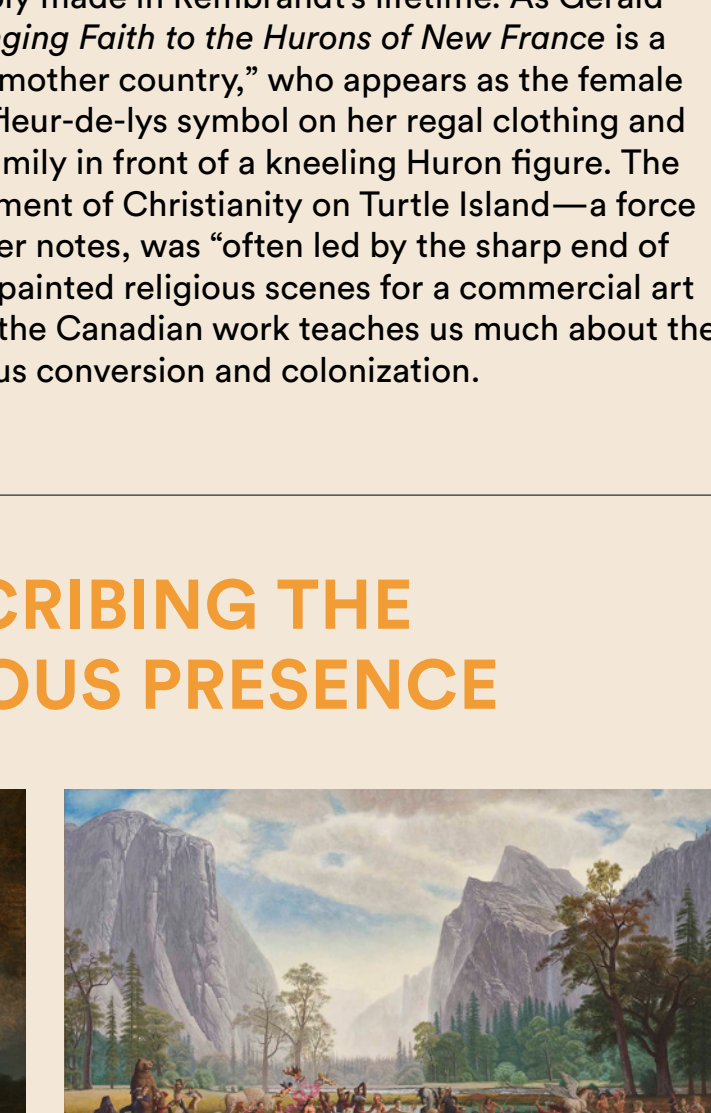
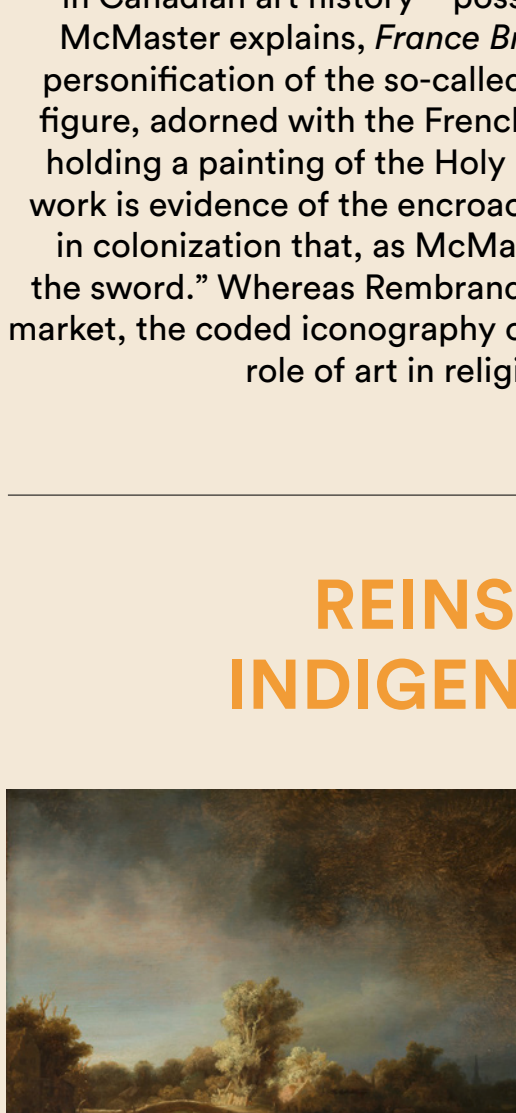
## POWER AND COMMODIFICATION



Above left: Jan Lievens, *Portrait of Adriaen Trip*, 1644, Rembrandt House Museum, Amsterdam. Above right: Bartholomeus van der Helst, *Portrait of Jacob Trip*, 1655, Amsterdam Museum. Below: Mordija Kitege Banza, *From 1848 to the Present*, 2006–20, Collection of the artist.

Seventeenth-century Dutch portraiture strove to communicate the social status of its sitters, highlighting their wealth, influence, and political reach. In *Rembrandt in Amsterdam*, the representation of power through portraiture is present in two portraits (top) of members of the prominent Trip family, whose strong poses, elaborate clothing, and confident gazes mask a darker history. The men invested in the Dutch East India Co. and the North American fur trade, whose histories of exploitation and human trafficking are well established. In *From 1848 to the Present*, 2006–20 (below), Mordija Kitege Banza's reflective tea spoons—arranged in rows and columns—are stand-ins for the bodies of African enslaved people, inviting viewers to reflect on the human cost of commodification, and to see and situate ourselves within these darker hidden histories.

## CONVERSION AND COLONIZATION



Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Descent from the Cross*, 1634, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

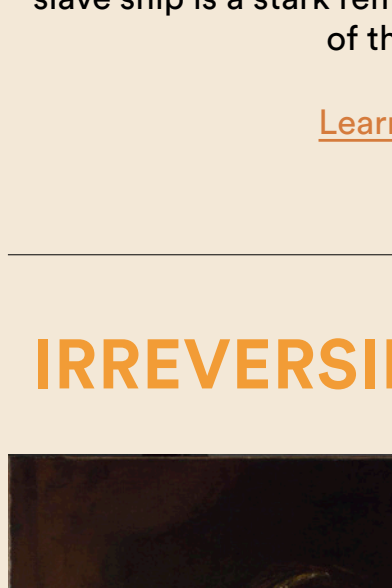
Anonymous, *France Bringing Faith to the Hurons of New France (La France apportant la foi aux Hurons de la Nouvelle-France)*, c.1670, Monastère des Ursulines de Québec, Québec City.

Christianity is a theme in Rembrandt's *The Descent from the Cross*, 1634 (left). It is also an integral feature of the rare seventeenth-century painting *France Bringing Faith to the Hurons of New France*, c.1670—one of the earliest paintings in Canadian art history—possibly made in Rembrandt's lifetime. As Gerald McMaster explains, *France Bringing Faith to the Hurons of New France* is a personification of the so-called "mother country," who appears as the female figure, adorned with the French fleur-de-lis symbol on her regal clothing and holding a painting of the Holy Family in front of a kneeling Huron figure. The work is evidence of the encroachment of Christianity on Turtle Island—a force in colonization that, as McMaster notes, was "often led by the sharp end of the sword." Whereas Rembrandt painted religious scenes for a commercial art market, the coded iconography of the Canadian work teaches us much about the role of art in religious conversion and colonization.

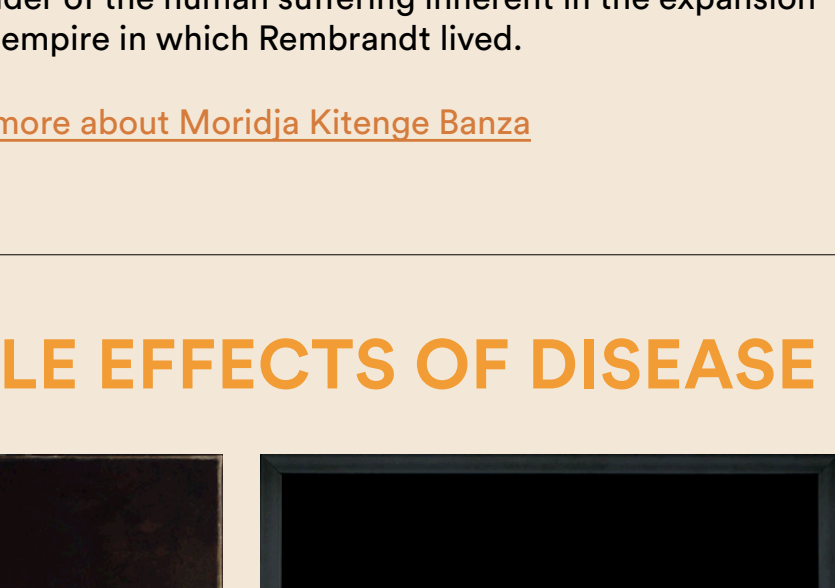
For more on Kent Monkman and [The Triumph of Mischief](#) read this essay by ACI author Shirley Madill

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## SUFFERING AMONG SPLENDOR



Zeeman (Reinier Nooms), *A View of Amsterdam Harbour*, c.1643–64, High Museum of Art, Atlanta.

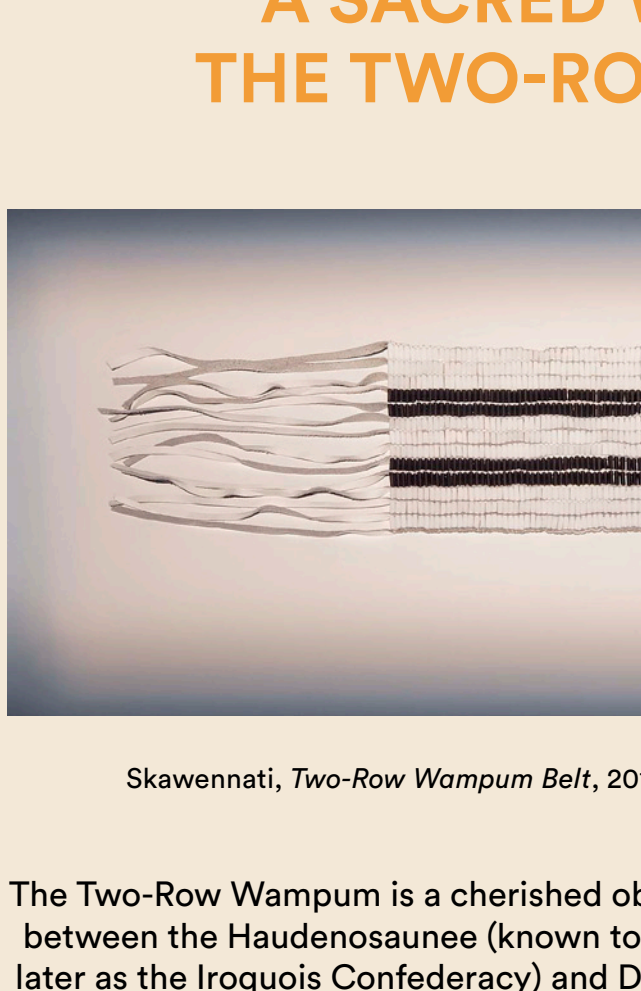


Mordija Kitege Banza, *From 1848 to the Present / Cross-section of a Slave Ship*, 2006–18, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

On the left, the engine of the Dutch mercantile economy is presented in Reinier Nooms's (1623–1667) harbour scene from the 1640s—a flurry of commercial activity that established Amsterdam as the hub of world trade. By the time Rembrandt settled in the wealthy city, the Dutch art market flourished—but at what cost? In *From 1848 to the Present / Cross-section of a Slave Ship*, 2006–18 (above right), the contemporary Montreal-based artist Mordija Kitege Banza (b.1980) conjures the horrendous conditions of the slave ships that transported hundreds of thousands of people from West Africa to be sold to work on tobacco, coffee, and sugar plantations for prominent slaving nations, including the Dutch. Banza's invocation of a print of the infamous and harrowing Brookes slave ship is a stark reminder of the human suffering inherent in the expansion of the empire in which Rembrandt lived.

[Learn more about Mordija Kitege Banza](#)

## IRREVERSIBLE EFFECTS OF DISEASE



Rembrandt van Rijn, *Portrait of Hendrickje Stoffels*, c.1654–56, National Gallery, London.

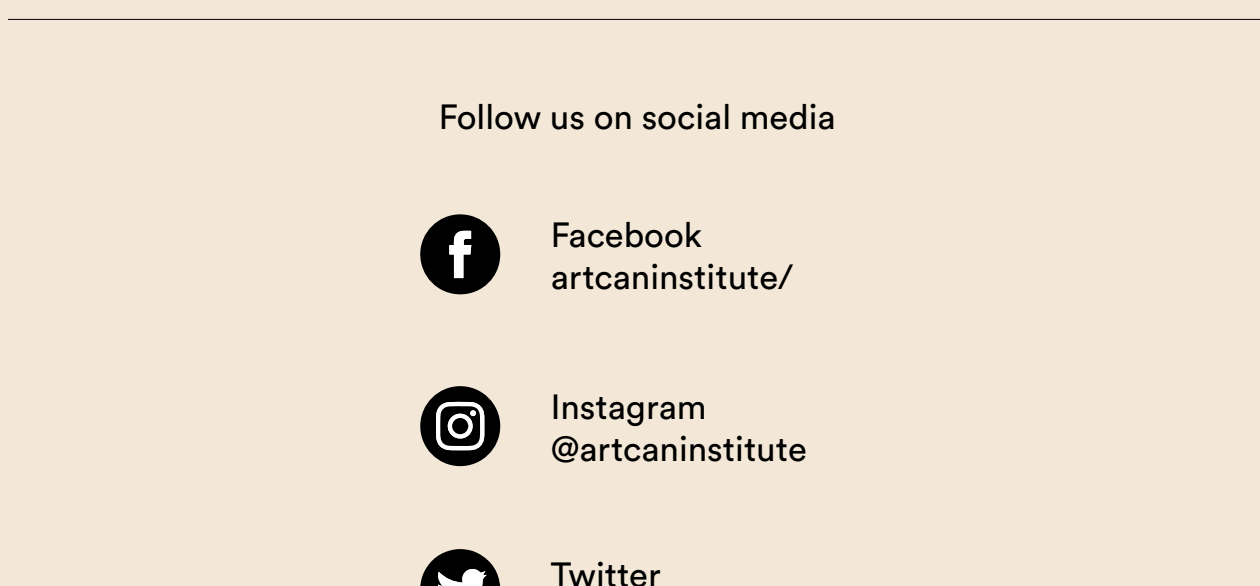


Ruth Cuthand, *Smallpox*, 2011, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

These two works, both present in the National Gallery exhibition, evoke the irreversible effects of disease in the story of European colonization. Rembrandt's signature rendering of light and psychological intensity is ever-present in the portrait of his partner Hendrickje Stoffels, who died in 1663, likely as a result of the plague that was sweeping through Europe at the time. A similarly harrowing story is evoked in the beaded work *Smallpox*, 2011, by Saskatchewan-born Ruth Cuthand (b.1954) of Plains Cree and Scottish ancestry. Part of a series of twelve works, Cuthand's art represents the viruses brought by Europeans into Indigenous communities during the contact period.

[Learn more about Ruth Cuthand](#)

## A SACRED WELCOME: THE TWO-ROW WAMPUM



Skawennati, *Two-Row Wampum Belt*, 2019, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

The Two-Row Wampum is a cherished object that commemorates the 1613 treaty between the Haudenosaunee (known to the French as the Iroquois League, and later as the Iroquois Confederacy) and Dutch settlers. In honour of *Rembrandt in Amsterdam*, the Two-Row Wampum is on loan from the Six Nations community, an act that McMaster notes reminds us "of these early relations and the respect inherent in the agreement," while also signalling that the artworks created by Rembrandt and his contemporaries "are being welcomed to Canada by their Indigenous hosts." Treaties and trade were intimately entwined during the early seventeenth century, and agreements between Indigenous nations and settlers were often enshrined through wampum belts like this one. Wampum refers to the small beads that were created from various regional materials—including northern whelks and quahog clams on the north island—and often used as currency during the fur trade.

[Learn more about wampum belts and Indigenous art in the exhibition](#)

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