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## Four early Rembrandt works reunited for first time at Ashmolean

Four panels from series on the five senses, one of them rediscovered only last year, go on display in Oxford



Staff hang one of the Rembrandt works at the Ashmolean.  
Photograph: Tom Pilston/the Guardian

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Four of Rembrandt's earliest paintings, depicting sight, hearing, touch and smell, are being reunited and going on public display for the first time.

In something of a coup, on Friday the [Ashmolean museum in Oxford](#) will unveil the four surviving panels from a series on the five senses, which the teenage Rembrandt created around 1624-25.

"It is the first time these paintings will ever be on show together so it is an amazing thing," said the gallery's curator of northern European art, An Van Camp. "As a curator, this is the stuff you dream of ... a world first. Even the owners of the paintings have never seen them together."

It came about because the gallery is planning a show in 2019-20 on young [Rembrandt](#). "We thought it would be nice to have a sort of teaser," said Van Camp.

The display is all the more remarkable because one of the paintings, Smell, [was rediscovered only last year](#), in the basement of a house in New Jersey. The painting's owners had no idea what it was, and nor did the auction house that offered it as a minor 19th-century painting with an estimate of \$500-\$800.

Word of its existence reached Paris dealers and some keen-eyed experts in European auction houses, each of whom had a suspicion that it could be a Rembrandt. A bidding war ensued and the painting was sold for \$870,000 (then worth about £565,000).

It was then sold for an undisclosed sum to the New York financier Thomas Kaplan, whose Leiden Collection is one of the world's largest private collections of art from the Dutch golden age.

The work has now been fully authenticated as a Rembrandt, which means the Leiden Collection – which Van Camp said was a good friend to the Ashmolean

– has three of the five. Sight is being lent by the [Museum de Lakenhal in Leiden](#). The fifth in the series, Taste, is still missing.

The small works, each no bigger than A4, are remarkable not just for who the artist was but also for the subject matter, which brings to the fore Rembrandt's sense of humour.

In *The Stone Operation (Touch)*, the young Rembrandt seems to mock the bizarre practice of the time of trying to cure bad headaches by using a scalpel to remove a stone from the skull.

*A Pedlar Selling Spectacles (Sight)* has a salesman of dubious honour selling to a squinting couple who are clearly blind as bats. *The Unconscious Patient (Smell)* has a wizened crone and probably quack doctor reviving a patient after he fainted during a blood-letting procedure.

*The Three Singers (Hearing)* seems to be the most innocent of the four; Van Camp theorises that the old woman is not singing well because she can't really read the songbook.

At first glance, the works may not immediately cry out Rembrandt – he was only 17 or 18 – but Van Camp said it was possible to see glimpses of the great painter he would become in the bright colours, broad brushwork, experimental treatment of light and the ability to capture human expression.

“The paintings show that at the age of just 18, Rembrandt has a genius for representing human character and emotion and for packing in amazing amounts of detail into the briefest of brushstrokes – skills that would see him become one of the most celebrated artists of all time,” Van Camp said.

In lieu of the fifth painting, the Ashmolean will display an empty frame and will invite people to describe, draw, paint or Photoshop what they think the painting might look like. The submissions can be tweeted using the hashtag [#MissingRembrandt](#).

“Who knows, maybe we'll find it,” Van Camp added. “That would be the best outcome.”