



*The Life Of
Rembrandt*

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Early Years in Leiden

The story of Rembrandt van Rijn begins in the charming city of Leiden, Netherlands, where he was born on July 15, 1606. Situated along the banks of the Oude Rijn river, Leiden was a bustling center of commerce and culture during the Dutch Golden Age. It was here, amid the atmospheric canals and historic buildings, that Rembrandt's journey as one of history's most celebrated artists took its first steps.

Rembrandt came from a relatively modest background. His father, Harmen Gerritszoon van Rijn, was a miller who owned a windmill on the Rhine River. This occupation provided the family with a steady income, though they were not wealthy. His mother, Neeltgen Willemsdochter van Zuytbrouck, came from a family of bakers. The van Rijn household valued education and culture, and Rembrandt received a good education for a boy of his time. He attended the Latin School in Leiden, where he was exposed to classical literature and the rudiments of humanist thought, which were to influence his later work.

From an early age, it was apparent that Rembrandt possessed a prodigious talent for drawing. His parents recognized his potential and supported his artistic inclinations. At the age of around fourteen, he left the Latin School to pursue his passion more seriously. He became an apprentice to Jacob van Swanenburgh, a local artist who had spent time in Italy and had brought back with him a keen interest in the techniques of the Italian Renaissance. Under van Swanenburgh's guidance, Rembrandt learned the basic skills of a painter, including perspective, composition, and the complex interplay of light and shadow.

Rembrandt's early works reflected both the influence of his teacher and his burgeoning curiosity about the human condition. He began to explore themes that would dominate his later work: the complexity of human emotions and the dramatic use of light and dark to enhance narrative tension. Even as a young artist, he showed an extraordinary ability to capture the subtleties of the human face and the depth of human emotion. By the time he completed his apprenticeship, he was ready to make his mark on the broader Dutch art scene.

In the next phase of his training, Rembrandt became a pupil of Pieter Lastman in Amsterdam. Lastman was a well-known history painter, famous for his vibrant, dramatic compositions and his skill in depicting historical and biblical narratives. The six months Rembrandt spent with Lastman were crucial in his development. Lastman's influence is evident in Rembrandt's early works, which show a keen interest in storytelling and a dramatic use of chiaroscuro—the contrast between light and dark.

After returning to Leiden, Rembrandt opened his own studio, sharing it with another young artist, Jan Lievens. The two became close friends and collaborators. They were both ambitious and competitive, pushing each other to improve and innovate. During this period, Rembrandt began to attract attention for his work. His portraits and historical scenes were marked by a compelling realism and emotional depth that set him apart from his contemporaries. He received commissions from local patrons and began to build a reputation as an artist of great promise.

By the time he was in his early twenties, Rembrandt was already on his way to becoming a master in his own right. The years in Leiden laid the foundation for his future success, not just in terms of technical skill, but also in the themes and approaches that would define his career. His early experiences in this historic city instilled in him a deep appreciation for the richness of human experience, an appreciation that would remain at the heart of his work throughout his life. The sense of place and community he experienced in Leiden provided a backdrop for his profound exploration of humanity, making it a fitting starting point for the story of his remarkable life.

As you close this chapter, imagine young Rembrandt walking through the cobblestone streets of Leiden, sketchbook in hand, eyes open to the world around him, each detail feeding his insatiable curiosity and his extraordinary gift. The city of Leiden, with its quaint charm and vibrant energy, was the fertile ground from which the genius of Rembrandt van Rijn would grow, setting the stage for one of the most remarkable artistic journeys the world has ever known.

