

POCKET WALKS · NEW YORK · NO. 4

The Dutch Rooms

Five paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, an hour on foot, and a code beside each one that opens the museum's own record of the work.

Every painting on this walk belongs to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and hangs in the European Paintings galleries on the second floor of the Fifth Avenue building. Entry, opening hours and the free floor plan are on the museum's page for visitors[1].

[1] metmuseum.org/plan-your-visit

HOW TO READ THE CODES

A small number after a phrase in the text points to a note at the foot of the same page. The note gives a short web address and a square code beside it: hold your phone's camera over the code and it opens the page. Every catalogue page carries the painting's measurements, its history and photographs you can enlarge until the brushstrokes show.

THE ROUTE

The walk starts in gallery 637 with the two merriest pictures of the century and ends among the landscapes of gallery 615. Galleries are given as the museum's online collection[2] listed them in October 2026. Paintings travel to exhibitions and change rooms, so when one is missing, scan its code: the catalogue says where it is.

Allow ten minutes a picture. The order below follows the rooms rather than the calendar, which is why the walk goes from 1623 to 1670, back to 1653 and forward again.

1. Frans Hals, *Young Man and Woman in an Inn*, 1623 · gallery 637
2. Jan Steen, *Merry Company on a Terrace*, about 1670 · gallery 637
3. Rembrandt, *Aristotle with a Bust of Homer*, 1653 · gallery 616
4. Vermeer, *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher*, about 1662 · gallery 614
5. Jacob van Ruisdael, *Wheat Fields*, about 1670 · gallery 615

BEFORE YOU GO

The European Paintings galleries are quietest in the first hour after opening and on weekday evenings. Photography without flash is allowed in the permanent collection, and the museum's free Wi-Fi reaches the galleries, so the codes work without a data plan. Large bags and coats go to the coat check by the entrance. Benches stand in most of the rooms on this walk: sit down in front of each picture before you read its page.

The walk suits children too. Hand them the phone for the codes, and before anyone reads a word, ask them to find the dog in the Hals, the toy horse in the Steen and the map in the Vermeer. The answers are in the pages that follow.

[2] metmuseum.org/art/collection

STOP 1 · GALLERY 637

Young Man and Woman in an Inn

Frans Hals, 1623



Oil on canvas, 105.4 × 79.4 cm. Bequest of Benjamin Altman, 1913 (14.40.602)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Open Access (CC0)

A young man in a broad grey hat lifts his glass high above his head, and a young woman leans on his shoulder, laughing with him. Hals painted them fast and close to the edges of the canvas, so that the pair seem about to step out of it. Look at the ruff and the cuffs: each is a few flicks of white over grey, placed once and left alone. Hals spent his working life in Haarlem as a portrait painter, and scenes of pleasure like this one are rare in his work.

The picture was long known as *Yonker Ramp and His Sweetheart*, a name the museum no longer uses. Behind the couple, in the dim room on the right, a smiling man stands by the fire. Some scholars see the scene as a modern version of the Prodigal Son spending his inheritance at the inn.

The painting came to the museum in 1913 with the bequest of the department-store owner Benjamin Altman, which you will meet again at the last stop. The catalogue entry[3] has a photograph detailed enough to count the flicks of white in the ruff.

[3] metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436616

STOP 2 · GALLERY 637

Merry Company on a Terrace

Jan Steen, about 1670



Oil on canvas, 141 × 131.4 cm. Fletcher Fund, 1958 (58.89)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Open Access (CC0)

Stay in the same room and turn to the large canvas of a party under a vine. A woman in a blue jacket, roses pinned at her bodice, leans back at the centre. A young man plays the lute beside her, an old man raises a glass of wine, a child in red leads a spaniel on a ribbon past a toy horse, and at the right a man on a ladder calls down to the company.

Steen painted disorder so often that a messy house is still called *a Jan Steen household* in Dutch. The tankard knocked over on the floor is part of the joke, and part of the lesson: each scene of plenty carries a warning about where it ends. Count the musicians too: beside the lute, a man at the far left plays a recorder. Steen often lent his own grinning face to one of his revellers, so look for him in the crowd.

Steen ran a tavern in Leiden for a time. The museum's record of the picture[4] leads to the other Steens in the collection, where some of these faces come back.

[4] metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437749

STOP 3 · GALLERY 616

Aristotle with a Bust of Homer

Rembrandt, 1653



Oil on canvas, 143.5 × 136.5 cm.
Purchase, special contributions and funds given or bequeathed by friends of the Museum, 1961 (61.198)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Open Access (CC0)

In the next room, out of a dark ground, a philosopher in a black hat and wide white sleeves rests his hand on the marble head of the poet Homer. His other hand fingers a heavy gold chain. The medallion on it is usually read as a portrait of Alexander the Great, the pupil Aristotle taught.

Rembrandt painted the picture for Don Antonio Ruffo, a nobleman in Messina, who had asked only for a philosopher. The thick paint of the sleeves catches the light; the face, thinly painted, stays in shadow. Ruffo later ordered two more canvases from Rembrandt, an Alexander and a Homer, to hang beside this one. Neither of them is in New York.

When the museum bought the canvas at auction in 1961, it paid 2.3 million dollars, then the highest price ever paid for a painting at a public sale. Queues formed on Fifth Avenue to see it. The catalogue[5] tells the rest of its history, from Sicily to New York.

[5] metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437394

STOP 4 · GALLERY 614

Young Woman with a Water Pitcher

Johannes Vermeer, about 1662



Oil on canvas, 45.7 × 40.6 cm. Marquand Collection, gift of Henry G. Marquand, 1889 (89.15.21)

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Two rooms on, a young woman opens a leaded window with one hand and holds a silver-gilt pitcher with the other. The light from the window crosses the white linen over her head and shoulders and turns blue and grey in its folds. A map of the Low Countries hangs on the wall; a jewellery box stands open on a table covered by a Turkish carpet.

Vermeer leaves the action unfinished. We do not know whether she is about to water a plant, to wash, or only to look outside. The basin and pitcher are the only gilded things in the room, and the brightest. Fewer than forty paintings by Vermeer survive, and five of them belong to this museum.

This was the first painting by Vermeer to enter an American collection, given to the museum by the banker Henry G. Marquand in 1889. Its catalogue page[6] has a photograph you can enlarge until the panes of the window fill the screen.

[6] metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437881

STOP 5 · GALLERY 615

Wheat Fields

Jacob van Ruisdael, about 1670



Oil on canvas, 100 × 130.2 cm. Bequest of Benjamin Altman, 1913 (14.40.623)

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The walk ends outdoors. A sandy road runs between fields of ripe wheat towards a line of trees and a farmhouse, and more than half the canvas is sky: a tower of cloud, white where the sun strikes it and grey underneath. A traveller in black walks along the road, and two smaller figures follow further back.

Ruisdael lived in Haarlem and then Amsterdam and painted the flat country around both cities for most of his life. The light falls in bands across this field, and shadow covers the road in the foreground. Step back to the middle of the room: from there the road seems to run into the canvas.

Like the Hals at the first stop[3], the picture came to the museum in 1913 with the Altman bequest. Its record[7] leads to the other Ruisdaels in the collection, if the hour has left you time for more.

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[7] metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437549