

Dutch museum recalls Nazi use of Rembrandt

REUTERS, Amsterdam

His face is one of the best known in the art world, and as the Netherlands celebrates the 400th anniversary of Rembrandt's birth, his life and work retain few secrets. But did you know he was once a Nazi icon?

An exhibition at the Dutch Resistance Museum in Amsterdam recalls the Nazis' largely forgotten mission to incorporate the Dutch painter into fascist ideology, and win sympathy in the Netherlands, which they occupied in 1940.

The artist appeared on Dutch stamps issued during the occupation, a "Rembrandt" prize was awarded for artistic contribution to National Socialist culture, and a Rembrandt opera and film were written.

The Nazis even tried to institute a national holiday on Rembrandt's birthday, July 15, to replace the traditional Queen's Day parties on the date of the Dutch Queen's birthday.

But the Dutch remained largely unenthusiastic, helping to preserve

the international standing of the 17th century artist, who painted nearly 100 self-portraits.

The Amsterdam exhibition, which opened in late June, includes the stamps, a 1941 film about Rembrandt, and old posters advertising Rembrandt Day.

When Nazi propagandists looked at Rembrandt's works -- admired for their striking use of light and shade and subtle, expressive power -- they saw images to fuel their myth of "blood and soil," the idea that those of German blood had a deep bond with their land and a superior, racially-pure character.

Adolf Hitler and other top Nazis collected Rembrandt's works, although little in the painter's thinking or personal history would have naturally branded him a figure for Nazi adulation.

When Hitler looked at "Man with a Golden Helmet," at the time attributed to Rembrandt, he singled out the soldier's heroic features.

"This proves that Rembrandt was a true Aryan and German,"

Hitler said, according to the Amsterdham museum.

RELATIONS WITH JEWS

The Germans badly needed an image boost after invading the Netherlands in just a few days and Rembrandt, born in Leiden in 1606 and considered typically Dutch for his Protestant faith and proud individualism, seemed the ideal figure.

An 1890 book by German Julius Langbehn had already extolled Rembrandt as an archetypal "Germanic" man, who strove for an authentic portrayal of his land and people.

Langbehn said Rembrandt's work reflected the German spirit, free of sterile intellectualism and decadence, and that his masterly depiction of light showed he could overcome forces of chaos and darkness.

Some Nazis were not convinced. They pointed out that Rembrandt had lived among Jews, painted Old Testament scenes and Jewish characters such as the rosy-

cheeked "Jewish bride."

But these concerns were swept aside as Rembrandt was simply too central to attempts to forge a new Germanic-Dutch identity.

"Rembrandt's nation celebrates its greatest son not as a possession for itself alone, but as one of the greatest and most noble creations of the Germanic spirit," said Tobie Goedewaagen, a leading figure in the Dutch National Socialist movement which supported the Nazis, in 1941.

A 1941 film, made in Amsterdam, maintained Jews were the cause of Rembrandt's financial woes, claiming they bought his paintings cheaply and sold them for a huge profit.

Rembrandt was declared bankrupt in 1656 and forced to leave his house in Amsterdam's most fashionable district for a more modest home. But the real source of his constant money troubles lay in his erratic spending and expensive tastes.

Rembrandt biographer Gary Schwartz believes that although

Rembrandt was certainly not the philo-Semite he was often depicted as, he was also no anti-Semite.

"Rembrandt was in the mainstream Christian thinking of his time about Judaism, that Jews were outside of God's redemption."

He was ready to live amongst them but he did spend much time wrangling with them, he said.

The Nazis, whose 1944 Rembrandt day proved a huge flop in the face of a cynical, resentful audience, were certainly not the first to try to use Rembrandt.

"(The Dutch) did a whitewash job on him in the 19th century," noted Schwartz, saying they linked Rembrandt to their "Golden Age" as a mighty maritime power and wealthy state.

During year-long celebrations ranging from walking tours through Rembrandt's favorite haunts to a musical about his colourful love-life, the Dutch hope finally to present as rounded and complete an image as possible of their beloved national painter.

Most Americans plan to vote for Democrats

AP, Washington

Republicans are in jeopardy of losing their grip on Congress in November.

With less than four months to the midterm elections, the latest Associated Press-Ipsos poll found that Americans by an almost 3-to-1 margin hold the GOP-controlled Congress in low regard and profess a desire to see Democrats wrest control after a dozen years of Republican rule.

Further complicating the GOP outlook to turn things around is a solid percentage of liberals, moderates and even conservatives who say they'll vote Democratic. The party out of power also holds the edge among persuadable voters, a prospect that doesn't bode well for the Republicans.

The election ultimately will be decided in 435 House districts and 33 Senate contests, in which incumbents typically hold the upper hand. But the survey underscored the difficulty Republicans face in trying

to persuade a sceptical public to return them to Washington.

The AP-Ipsos poll of 1,000 adults conducted Monday through Wednesday found that President Bush has stopped his political freefall, with his approval rating of 36 percent basically unchanged from last month. Bush received slightly higher marks for his handling of the Iraq war and the fight against terrorism, weeks after his surprise trip to Baghdad and the killing of Iraqi terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in a US airstrike last month.

But a Democratic takeover of either the House or Senate would be disastrous for the president, leaving both his agenda for the last two years in office and the chairmanship of investigative committees in the hands of the opposition party. To seize control of Congress, the Democrats must displace 15 Republicans from House seats and six Republicans from the Senate.

The AP-Ipsos survey asked 789 registered voters if the election for the House were held today, would they vote for the Democratic or

Republican candidate in their district. Democrats were favoured 51 percent to 40 percent.

Not surprisingly, 81 percent of self-described liberals said they would vote for the Democrat. Among moderates, though, 56 percent backed a Democrat in their district and almost a quarter of conservatives -- 24 percent -- said they will vote Democratic.

Democrats also held the advantage among persuadable voters those who are undecided or wouldn't say whom they prefer. A total of 51 percent said they were leaning Democrat, while 41 percent were leaning Republican.

"We still have wind in our face. It's a midterm election in the president's second term," said Rep. Tom Reynolds, R-N.Y., chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee. "Today is a little bit better in the atmospherics of Washington than it was maybe a month ago."

EU demands opening of Egypt-Gaza border for aid

AFP, Helsinki

The European Union yesterday called for the border between Gaza and Egypt to be opened, saying it was deeply concerned by the poor conditions facing Palestinians stranded there.

Israel has blockaded Gaza after the abduction of an Israeli soldier during an attack on a military post at the end of June.

"We demand the opening of the frontiers for humanitarian aid and for the people stranded on the Egyptian side of the border to be able to return to their homes," Finnish Foreign Minister Erkki Tuomioja, whose country holds the rotating EU presidency, told a news conference.

"I have heard that there may have been also already some casualties among the hundreds of Palestinians stranded (on the Egyptian border)," he said.

Heart failure may run in family: Study

REUTERS, New York

The children of parents with heart failure have an increased likelihood of developing the condition themselves, new findings from the Framingham Offspring Study suggest.

"If our findings are confirmed, there would be added justification for adding heart failure to the list of conditions that one can inquire about when obtaining family history of medical disorders from patients," Dr Vasan S. Ramachandran told Reuters Health.

Ramachandran, from Boston University School of Medicine, and colleagues investigated whether a parental history of heart failure increased the risk of impaired function of the left ventricle of the heart -- its main pumping chamber -- or overt heart failure in the offspring, using data from study participants.

The offspring of parents with heart failure had higher rates of

increased left ventricular dysfunction and dimensions than did offspring whose parents did not have heart failure, the investigators report.

During a 20-year follow-up, the presence of parental heart failure was associated with higher rates of heart failure in the offspring, the researchers found. The adjusted rate of heart failure was 70 percent higher than in those without parental heart failure, according to the report, published in The New England Journal of Medicine.

Not surprisingly, the presence of heart failure in both parents increased the risk of heart failure in the offspring more than did heart failure in only one parent, the report indicates.

"Our demonstration of an increased familial risk of heart failure suggests, but does not establish, a causal relation of genetic factors to the disease process," the team concludes.