



# PASSION FOR PAINT

A NATIONAL GALLERY TOURING EXHIBITION IN PARTNERSHIP WITH  
BRISTOL'S MUSEUMS, GALLERIES & ARCHIVES SERVICE AND TYNE & WEAR MUSEUMS



REMBRANDT VAN RIJN  
(1606–1669)  
Portrait of Margaretha de  
Geer, Wife of Jacob Trip, 1661  
Oil on canvas, 75.3 × 63.8 cm  
The National Gallery, London  
Presented by the National Art  
Collections Fund, 1941

Made late in Rembrandt's career, this portrait uses paint to sculpt the features of Margaretha de Geer, who was from a wealthy Netherlands family. The nose and brightly lit forehead are built up with thick paint, pushing these areas into the viewer's space. Elsewhere, Rembrandt has used thin paint in tiny brushstrokes to mould the bony features and sagging flesh of the face. Little dabs and smudges take the place of distinct outlines for aspects such as the eyebrows. The textured effect of the paint appeals to our knowledge of the way three-dimensional objects can be touched, making the face appear more real. In keeping with his usual practice, Rembrandt has varied the skin hues by introducing small touches of colour from



different parts of the face into adjoining areas. In this way he is able to modify the dark underpaint layers left as shading without seriously disturbing the strength of modelling that the colour contrasts create. There is some evidence that Rembrandt preferred his pictures to be viewed from a distance. This allows the different elements to coalesce in a vividly naturalistic way, despite the boldness of some of Rembrandt's painting, such as the red streaks that form furrows beside the woman's mouth. Again exploiting texture, Rembrandt has painted the woman's large ruff with a smoother finish, which offsets the potential dominance of its white colour and prevents it from projecting too much at the expense of the face.

In his portrayal of the Christian saint Mary Magdalene, the Italian artist Guido Reni has exploited the capacity of smooth, thin glazes of oil paint to create convincing illusions of space and form. Through careful paint work describing her large eyes brimming with tears and parted lips, Reni aimed to give solid form to religious emotion. The undulating brushstrokes of her luxuriant fair hair were intended to portray a sensual kind of beauty, a coded reference to Mary Magdalene's previous life as a prostitute. (Some of the lower curls, however, seem to be later additions.) Flowing, graceful paint handling was a feature of Reni's work in the second half of his career, when this picture was painted. It was seen at the time as expressing a quality of spiritual grace particularly appropriate to Reni's depiction of Mary Magdalene, who achieved grace through repentance.



GUIDO RENI  
(1575–1642)  
Saint Mary Magdalene,  
about 1634–5  
Oil on canvas, 79.3 × 68.5 cm  
The National Gallery, London

GLENN BROWN  
(born 1966)  
A Little Death, 2000  
Oil on panel, 68 × 54 cm  
Thomas Dane Gallery, London

'Rembrandt and Auerbach painted the living. Their flesh has become paint, so I paint paint', Glenn Brown has said. His playfully ironic pictures are based on modern or historic art to which he feels a special connection. In *A Little Death*, developed from pictures by Frank Auerbach, Brown has created a perfectly flat version of the thick layered paint of the original inspiration. The apparently broad brushstrokes are actually composed of thin lines of colour in intricate patterns. Around the face, the suggestion of hair turns into abstract coils, making it clear that this is paint. Similarly the airy blue background (at odds with Auerbach's style) suddenly becomes flat colour as it bites into the outline of the head. Brown's use of tiny brushes to apply thin layers of oil paint on a smooth wooden panel results in another illusion: the apparent disappearance of the medium, making it difficult to believe that the image is created from paint and brushes. The craftsmanship is comparable to that of many centuries ago, and is deliberately at odds with contemporary painting modes. The seemingly ecstatic expression of the picture's subject reveals its additional connection to smoothly painted representations of saints by artists such as Guido Reni. The title, a term for orgasm, is a joking reference to this ecstatic quality.

