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The World's Largest Private Rembrandt Collection Goes on View at the Louvre

Owned by a previously anonymous collector couple, the two new exhibitions are a 'coming out.'

Laura van Straaten, February 23, 2017

Thomas Kaplan (L), and Louvre curator Blaise Ducos. Photo Laura van Straaten.

Outside a tiny circle of dealers in Dutch Masters and the people who curate in that field, few in the larger art world have known much about the collecting and lending proclivities of an art savvy New York-born billionaire businessman and his Israeli-American wife. Until now.

“It’s like our coming out party,” said Thomas S. Kaplan, who revealed this week that he and his wife Daphne Recanati Kaplan have amassed in just 14 years more than 250 portraits, history paintings and genre scenes by five generations of Dutch Masters, including a Vermeer and 13 works by Rembrandt. During a frenzied five-year period, they were acquiring a Dutch Master every week. And, they’ve been loaning them anonymously to some of the world’s most important art institutions since shortly after their first acquisition, in 2003.

“‘Let the dice fly high!’” Kaplan said, quoting Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*: “The idea that this would not be something of an occasion was delusional. Basically this is crossing the Rubicon.”

As part of the Louvre’s 2017 exhibition season celebrating the Dutch Golden Age, a selection of those works from what the Kaplans call The Leiden Collection, after Rembrandt’s birthplace, are now on at the Louvre in two exhibits that opened Wednesday.

The couple’s pivot towards the public stems from two goals. First, Kaplan explained, they began to feel that not just the paintings but also the diligently researched provenance and scholarship by the Leiden team, led by curator Dominique Surh, needed to be shared as efficiently as possible. But he says, “We were always ambivalent about books: no one reads them, they are given away, they end up on coffee tables.” The answer? The World Wide Web, and the publication just days ago of TheLeidenCollection.com—and with it, the renunciation of anonymity.

Second, he says that the main reason he and his wife were willing to go public with their holdings was “a strong sense of mission” that is all at once against the rise of nationalism and fascism in Europe, America and Russia; against ISIL’s destruction of cultural treasures; towards a stance for humanistic values and freedoms everywhere. “My dream exhibition is the one we are discussing with Louvre Abu Dhabi, just down the roads from Mosul and Aleppo,” he confided, “It’s a soft power *riposte*: French Christians and American Jews joining hands with Gulf Arabs for an alliance with civilization.”

Johannes Vermeer, Young Woman Seated at a Virginal, (1670-1720) ©The Leiden Collection, New York

Situated in the Sully Wing, which faces the Louvre's main courtyard, "Masterpieces of the Golden Age of Rembrandt from The Leiden Collection," on view through May 20, showcases 30 pieces owned by the Kaplans. "This is the first time I'm seeing all these together!" he said with obvious glee.

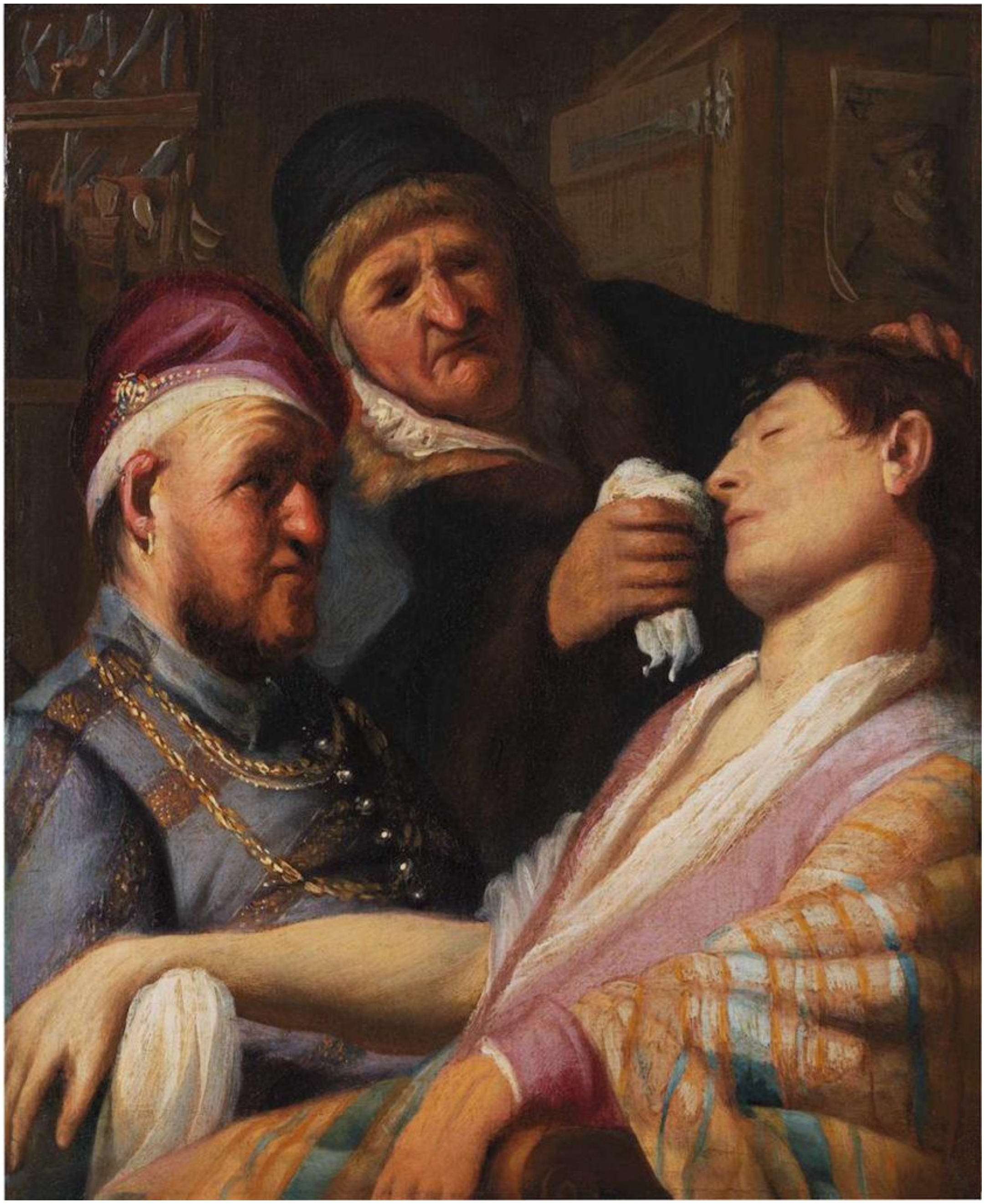
Two additional loans by the Kaplans are on view as part of the subterranean sister show, “Vermeer and the Masters of Genre Painting,” including Vermeer’s Young Woman Seated at a Virginal (ca. 1670–72), painted—says science—on the same bolt of canvas at the Louvre’s own Lacemaker, and quietly purchased from Las Vegas collector Steve Wynn during the most recent global financial crisis.

The exhibition on Vermeer and his peers includes 12 Vermeers, a third of the known extant paintings, and purports to show how Vermeer’s moniker “The Sphinx of Delft” is a misnomer. Supplemented by works by many of the same artists in the Leiden show upstairs, including a Kaplan loan of Frans van Mieris’s Young Woman with a Parrot, the Vermeer show makes a convincing case that the artist was not an unapproachable and mysterious genius but instead was part of a competitive circle of influence among several generations of artists.

In fact, both exhibitions are a “Who’s Who” of the artistic life of the Low Lands starting in the 1650s. The Leiden Collection is now arguably the most important group of 17th century Flemish paintings known to be in private hands, and the number of selected works on view in the Leiden exhibition will double in size, to roughly 60 paintings, when it heads to the National Museum in Beijing (June 16 – September 3), followed by the Long Museum in Shanghai (September 23 – February 11, 2018), and eventually the Louvre Abu Dhabi, and tours yet to be announced in the Americas and Europe. Meanwhile, the Vermeer exhibition is on view in Paris through May 22, then heads to Dublin’s National Gallery of Ireland (June 17 – September 17) and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C, (October 22 – January 21, 2018).

If Mrs. Kaplan, known to be a serious collector of modernist design, was on hand during a day-long press event hosted by the Louvre, she did not make herself known, though her husband, a doctor of history who resembles Colin Firth with slightly redder hair, rocked on his heels in anticipation of the opening.

He described how he “fell in love with Rembrandt” and then the other masters of Flemish painting while visiting the Met at age six with his mother: “I remember saying, ‘Take me back to the Wem-bwant!’” He kept the passion alive with explorations of Flemish art on family trips and as a young adult.



Rembrandt van Rijn, Unconscious Patient (Allegory of Smell) (ca. 1624-25) ©The Leiden Collection, New York

"I've never had a desire to collect contemporary and until 2003 when I was informed that the paintings I love were *actually* available for sale*,"* he paused for dramatic effect, "I didn't have any of the collector mindset."

At first, “my wife and I couldn’t imagine even having one Rembrandt!” he said. But they quickly began to want “the depth and the breadth of the artists we’re excited about, both early and late work.”

Mr. Kaplan accessorized his baggy blue suit with a waistcoat, broad tie, and pocket kerchief and his conversation—including during a brief one-on-one interview—with a diverse array of cultural references: Aristotle, Dostoevsky, André Malraux, Napoleon, Bach, Jewish theology, the naturalist E.O. Wilson…and Charles Saatchi.

The Rembrandt and Vermeers will surely bring in the masses, but Blaise Ducos, the curator for both exhibitions, has opted to showcase the blockbusters alongside a selection of many extraordinary and unique gems by artists less broadly known. (During the previews for both exhibitions, even jaded art journalists went wide-eyed, one exclaiming as the tour progressed “*Mon Dieu*!” or “*Sacre Bleu*!”)

And though one can’t know what treasures have yet to be revealed in subsequent shows, the Kaplans seemed not to have held back. For starters, they’ve lent all of their 11 Rembrandt paintings—the largest Rembrandt collection outside of a national museum. One is *Minerva* (part of a series now represented at the Prado, Metropolitan, and Hermitage museums): “We acquired her for less than the price of an Andy Warhol,” Kaplan said, adding, “I’m not judging other people’s taste.”

There are three paintings from Rembrandt’s series on the Allegories of the Senses, including *Unconscious Patient (Allegory of Smell)*, which was unknown until it came up for auction in 2015 and his *Young Girl with a Gold-Trimmed Cloak* (object of a famous armed robbery at Boston’s MFA). Of his two drawings here, the arrestingly lovely *A Young Lion Resting* has special resonance: it was the first Rembrandt purchased (in 2006) by the Kaplan family, who until this week has been chiefly known for its worldwide philanthropic support of wildlife conservation, especially big cats.

Recovering from the rush of the Rembrandts, your eyes don’t know quite where to focus first. Look, three paintings by Rembrandt’s studio-mate and friendly rival, Jan Lievens—including *Boy in a Cape and Turban (Portrait of Prince Rupert of the Palatinate (*ca. 1631), a roughly

26 by 20 inch oil on panel which is the marquee image for the exhibition. (Kaplan, gesturing to the work, noted that this was a Western Boy in Orientalist garb.)

Jan Lievens (1607-1674), Boy in a Cape and Turban
(Portrait of Prince Rupert of the Palatinate) ca. 1631)

Over there is *Hagar and the Angel,* by Rembrandt pupil Carel Fabritius, popularly known thanks to author Donna Tartt’s popular and Pulitzer Prize-winning 2013 novel *The Goldfinch*. For more than two centuries, the work was owned by Austrian royals and believed to be by Rembrandt until a recent cleaning revealed the signature of Fabritius.

There are three paintings by Rembrandt's first and most influential pupil, Gerrit Dou, alongside works by Dou's leading pupils, Frans van Mieris (the most expensive artist in Europe in his day), Gabriel Metsu, and Godefridus Schalcken. (The Kaplans are said to have the deepest representation of fijnschilder.) Then it's three works by Jan Steen; a jewel-like oval portrait on copper by Frans Hals; and *David Gives Uriah a letter for Joab* (1619) by Rembrandt's and Lievens's teacher, Pieter Lastman, which was the prize in a restitution battle that resulted in the Hague's Mauritshuis—which houses the Royal Cabinet of Paintings—returning the painting to the family of the art dealer Jacques Goudstikker.

From the outset, the Kaplans decided to be lenders, not hoarders, of their collection. Since their first anonymous loan, in 2004, to the J. Paul Getty Museum, they have become, Kaplan says, the world's "lending library" of Dutch Golden Age painting with more than 170 additional loans to approximately 25 museums around the globe, from major national museums in the U.S., France, Japan, England, and Ireland to smaller institutions in towns across the very Low Lands where their makers painstakingly brought them into being several centuries ago.

However, the Kaplans' history with the Louvre began with a bidding war and culminated not just in these works on view now, but also in a gift. Although the Kaplans had long ago decided never to bid against a public institution, the Louvre itself was taking advantage of the same anonymity the couple was enjoying when Bol's Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well (ca. 1645-46) was auctioned. "If we'd known the Louvre had wanted it, we'd have stepped aside," Kaplan recalls, looking sheepishly at Ducos, who admitted, "I was very melancholic when we couldn't buy the Bol." A dialogue began that led to the extensive loans currently on view, and the Kaplans have now given the painting outright to the Louvre, marking the first gift since the collection's inception.

On Monday, speaking to the assembled press who were later provided copies of what he called a "manifesto," Kaplan explained that rather than "silently acquiescing to the building of walls or the burning of bridges," he and his wife hoped "to use Old Masters to further the cause of promoting humanism and its noble offspring: tolerance and mutual respect."

He concluded, "We can settle for nothing less."