

REVIEW



FROM TOP: THE LEIDEN COLLECTION, NEW YORK; CHRISTIE'S IMAGES LIMITED 2017

JAN LIEVENS'S
'Boy in a Cape
and Turban'
(around 1631).

ICONS: COLLECTOR'S EYE

A PRIVATE COLLECTION FOR THE PUBLIC

A couple lends out their hoard of Rembrandts and more to museums

BY J.S. MARCUS



FOR NEW YORK ASSET MANAGER Thomas S. Kaplan and his wife, Daphne Recanati Kaplan, a painting is often something to hang on someone else's walls—those of museums. The couple has assembled a collection of some 250 works by Golden Age Dutch artists, including 13 Rembrandts, that rivals the holdings of many major museums. They are as interested in distributing as collecting.

The Kaplans, who divide their time between New York and Paris, began their Dutch art collection in 2003 and not long after started to circulate the works anonymously to dozens of museums. They call their holdings “The Leiden Collection,” after Rembrandt’s Dutch birthplace, and they have followed the arc of the artist’s career by collecting a wide range of his pupils and followers—such as Gerrit Dou, a creator of refined genre paintings, and Jan Lievens, Rembrandt’s Leiden colleague. One rarity is “Hagar and the Angel,” one of only 13 surviving paintings by Rembrandt pupil Carel Fabritius, whose 1654 painting “The Goldfinch” inspired Donna Tartt’s 2013 novel of the same name. “Hagar” is the only Fabritius painting in private hands.

In the past few months, the Kaplans have put high-resolution reproductions of much of their entire collection online along with essays by leading authorities on Dutch art. At the Louvre in Paris, 32 Kaplan-owned works are on display in “Masterpieces From the Leiden Collection: The Age of Rembrandt,” while six works are on view at the Sterling and Francine Clark Institute in Williamstown, Mass. The Kaplans also collect 20th-century modernist designers, including furniture by Italy’s Carlo Mollino (1905–1973). Below, an edited interview with Mr. Kaplan, 54.

I first discovered Rembrandt when I was 6 years old. My mother took me to the Metropolitan Museum in New York, and it was love at first sight. All I wanted to do was go back every weekend and see Rembrandt. She tried to diversify my intellectual portfolio with modern art, but I shook my head, crossed my arms and said, “Mommy, take me back to the Wembwandt.” I was missing my two front teeth.

Our preference has always been to buy before things go to auction. Buying from a dealer is beautifully transparent and friendly. I can genuinely say it’s the only area of interaction that has never been disappointing or disagreeable. I haven’t encountered that in business or in philanthropy.

Conservation of big cats, like lions, is my passion. In 2005, I took my wife to see the Rembrandt drawing “Young Lion Resting.” Afterward, we were in the car, playing with our daughter on the way home. “Tell me,” I said. “What do you think?” The drawing was expensive, and I didn’t want to do this lightly. She

said, “Tom, it’s a Rembrandt, it’s a lion, and it’s beautiful. If it’s not for you, then who is it for?”

Luck is a very important part of the business I am in—mining and energy. The odds of being able to make a mineral discovery are 1,000 to 1 against you. But ultimately, I think that luck itself is not such a great factor in art collecting. Having the right relationships is what’s im-

portant. And having the right ethical reputation is important. People need to know that you will be discreet, that a handshake is a handshake—that you’re fair. That’s not a function of luck. The part about having enough capital may very much be a function of luck, but the way capital is deployed is more a function of character.

We had this sense that there was something socially useful in taking these paintings from the private domain and putting them back into the public domain.

We live with our design collection, which my wife began more than 20 years ago, when modernist design was just becoming interesting. That was her passion, and she got me into it. Eventually, I was the one who took it to another level of insanity.

After acquiring an artwork, we don’t celebrate. But there have been some moments that were truly exquisite, like when we bought “Boy in a Cape and Turban” by Jan Lievens in 2004. I happened to be with a dealer in London. I bought it at an auction in New York, and after we got off the phone, all we had was wine and chocolate. Between the red wine and the chocolate, we went on some sort of flavonoid overload. We were dancing around the gallery; we knew this was a masterpiece.

Ultimately, it has become more than a masterpiece, this image of the young prince in oriental garb. It became our first loan—it was the face that launched the lending library.



A 1946 lounge chair from Casa M-1, Turin, by Carlo Mollino.

‘Take me back to the Wembwandt.’