



THE REGINATO FILES

JAMES REGINATO

THE GOLD STANDARD

With his stellar collection of Dutch Golden Age paintings touring the globe and an online catalogue available to all, Thomas Kaplan uses culture to bring people together.



(Above) Rembrandt's 1633 *Portrait of a Man in a Red Coat*.

(Opposite) Dr Thomas Kaplan at the Louvre, where a selection of Dutch Golden Age works from his collection is on view through 22 May.

ALL IMAGES ARE COURTESY THE LEIDEN COLLECTION

“When I’m in, I’m all-in,” says Dr Thomas Kaplan during a recent conversation in his Manhattan office, as he describes his philosophy of life. Such innate fervour surely accounts for the success he has enjoyed as an investor and asset manager focusing on the natural resources sector. It also explains how he has been able to amass one of the greatest art collections of our time at warp speed. In less than a decade, Kaplan and his wife, Daphne Recanati Kaplan, have put together – from scratch – the world’s largest private grouping of works from the Dutch Golden Age, an unparalleled ensemble known as the Leiden Collection. This spring, in one of the most ambitious recent efforts in digital art publishing, the couple launched an online scholarly catalogue documenting their holdings, and since February, the Louvre in Paris has been showcasing nearly 30 paintings and drawings from the Leiden Collection. Running through 22 May, the exhibition will then travel to the National Art Museum of China in Beijing, the Long Museum in Shanghai and eventually the forthcoming Louvre Abu Dhabi.

Composed of some 250 paintings and drawings, the Leiden Collection largely focuses on Rembrandt and his school while spanning five generations of 17th-century Dutch painting. Its comprehensive representation of the Dutch Golden Age – principally portrait, genre and history paintings – includes exceptional works by many of the most brilliant artists of the period. In addition to eleven paintings and two drawings by Rembrandt, the grouping (named

after the city where the master was born and began painting) contains thirteen works by Gerrit Dou – who spent three formative years in Rembrandt’s studio starting at age fourteen – and eleven by Jan Steen. Also represented are treasures by Frans Hals, Sir Peter Paul Rubens and Johannes Vermeer, whose *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal* is the only painting of the 34 known works in the artist’s mature style to remain in private hands.

Kaplan’s passion for Dutch masters goes back to his early childhood. “I was touched by Rembrandt in a very deep way when I first encountered one of his paintings at the Metropolitan Museum [in New York], when I was six,” he recalls. “When I was eight, and my parents asked me where I wanted to go on vacation I said, ‘Amsterdam,’ because that’s where Rembrandt was from. I was floored by the beauty of the Old Masters, the richness of the inner life that they were able to capture.”

Still, he didn’t own a single Dutch picture until 2003. “I thought they were all in museums,” he explains. But during a sailing trip off the coast of Dalmatia, a chat with eminent curator and art historian Sir Norman Rosenthal, a fellow passenger, altered his destiny. “Norman asked me what I collected, and I said that I didn’t really collect, though my taste was for Dutch Old Masters,” Kaplan recounts. “He said to me, ‘My dear boy, what you like is quite underappreciated and available, though not every day.’” Kaplan continues: “I told him, ‘Well, if you see a Gerrit Dou, let me know.’”

Not long after, Rosenthal alerted Kaplan to a Dou that was on the market in London. Kaplan snapped it up along with another Dou he found the following month. “For the next five years, my wife and I collected, on average, a painting a week,” he says.

“Our passion – our rapaciousness – made us certainly the most aggressive buyers of Old Masters,” the collector confesses. “In many cases, I went directly to the owners of these paintings. Oftentimes, dealers knew where these potentially available pictures were, but they did not have the resources to buy them for stock, or they didn’t think the owners would ever sell.” A driven pragmatist, Kaplan notes: “My methodology gave me a relative advantage. I made decisions often within minutes and paid immediately.” As their collection took shape, the Kaplans decided that they would rather lend their treasures than hoard them. Initially, they did so with strict anonymity. “We had no desire to have a high profile in the art world. On the contrary, I wanted it to be *sub rosa*,” Kaplan says. “The collection does not have our name, and we didn’t lend with our names.” But lend they did. “I was inspired by the example of Eli Broad’s lending library,” says Kaplan, referring to the contemporary art patron’s early efforts to increase public access to his massive holdings through an enterprising loan programme. (Broad later opened his own museum, of course.) “There wasn’t anything like it for Old Masters,” he continues. The Leiden Collection thus became the world’s singular lender of Dutch Golden Age paintings; its works have been exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, as well as scores of other museums across the globe.

But given the growing stature of their collection, the Kaplans concluded that their anonymity had to come to an end. “We realised that we could no longer be discreetly out of the way,” Kaplan explains. “There was no way a couple could collect eleven Rembrandts and not be part of the story.” In 2006, Kaplan initiated the idea of publishing a scholarly catalogue with the aim of making a contribution to the field of 17th-century Dutch art. A forward thinker, he



(Clockwise from right) Jan Lievens’s circa 1631 *Boy in a Cape and Turban (Portrait of Prince Rupert of the Palatinate)*; *Unconscious Patient (Allegory of Smell)*, circa 1624–25, and *Lioness Resting*, circa 1638–42, by Rembrandt, all in the Leiden Collection.

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quickly decided that online was the way to go. “I much prefer to look at auction catalogues online: when my eye lands on an image, I want to zoom in on it,” he says, by way of explanation. “And by putting [the catalogue] online, it can be constantly updated and accessible to everyone.”

More than twenty leading scholars, curators and technology specialists toiled for ten years on the project, led by Arthur K Wheelock, Jr, curator of Northern Baroque Paintings at the National Gallery of Art. A marvel of scholarship and technology, this invaluable resource (theleidencollection.com) was launched with appropriate fanfare at a celebration at New York’s Frick Collection in January.

As brilliant as the resolution of the images is, it is no substitute for the pictures themselves, some of which the public has the opportunity to see at the Louvre this spring. For the Kaplans, who maintain a home in Paris – where two of their three children were born – the exhibition has much personal resonance. Its future stops in China and the Arabian Gulf have great significance as well, Kaplan explains: “For the Chinese, Rembrandt is the most renowned name in global art. We are deploying Rembrandt as a tool to build bridges between the West and the rest of the world,” he continues. “It is very important to find common humanity, to find universal values and to use culture to bring people together.”

But should art not speak to everyone, the Kaplans have undertaken a similarly ambitious feat in the area of wildlife conservation, perhaps their greatest passion. Among the leading funders in the field, they have invested more than \$100 million in environmental pursuits over the past decade. One of their primary initiatives, Panthera, founded in 2006, works to protect and preserve big cats and their critical ecosystems. Here, too, the couple has forged global connections. “We have made alliances with partners we have brought in, such as the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi,” Kaplan says, adding: “We have people from all over the world – Gulf Arabs, Chinese, American Jews, Indians – working together.”

Whether through Dutch Old Masters or big cats, for these collectors, thinking big means as big as the world.

James Reginato is writer-at-large of *Vanity Fair* and author of *Great Houses, Modern Aristocrats* (Rizzoli).