

US billionaire brings Dutch masters to China

With his exhibition of works by Rembrandt, Tom Kaplan hopes to boost the artist's legacy

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Standing in a dimly lit gallery space in China's National Museum, the owner of the world's only privately held Vermeer gazed at the small oil painting for a long moment, before showing it to the assembled press.

Since American billionaire Tom Kaplan purchased the piece in 2008, it has spent most of its time on loan to various museums around the world.

When the investor – who made his fortune betting on precious metals and natural gas – and his wife began buying up works by 17th century Dutch painters in 2003, their goal was to take “paintings from the private domain and return them to the public”, he said.

Now the collection is set to find its biggest audience yet when a selection of about 70 of its more than 250 works goes on show from Saturday until September 3 just steps from Tiananmen Square.



The mainland is the first stop on a world tour of the works, known as the Leiden Collection after the Dutch town where many of its contributors plied their trade during the European nation’s golden age.

After three months in Beijing, the exhibition will move to a private museum in Shanghai before heading to Russia and then the United Arab Emirates. The National Museum, according to officials, has passed the Louvre to become the world’s most visited, and if all goes according to plan, the exhibition will see hundreds of thousands of visitors.

While the Vermeer is a showstopper, the exhibit is built around the Kaplans' collection of 11 Rembrandts and focuses on the artist's evolution and influence on his contemporaries.

It is a major step towards achieving the couple's goal of promoting the Dutch master's legacy to an international audience, an effort which Kaplan believes will be greatly boosted by a positive reception on the mainland.



“The cultural influence of China is going to multiply in the next decade,” he said, adding that the painter's future will “be very different depending on the way China reacts to his art”.

“The country will hopefully embrace Rembrandt for the genius he is.”

As attendees leave the exhibition, they will be confronted by a wall of paintings captioned with an admonition to “Beware of Riches”.

While the exhibition is expected to receive a warm welcome in China, the underlying message might find a less eager audience. The concept of “universal values” is not a popular one on the mainland, where the government of President Xi Jinping has demonstrated an almost reflexive distaste for the kinds of “Western” ideals Kaplan embraces. But the billionaire has no interest in lecturing. Rembrandt, he said, speaks for himself.