

► Beijing's NMC kicks off largest exhibition of 17th-century Dutch paintings ever held in China

By Huang Tingting

Seventy-four paintings by big 17th-century names such as Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-69) and Johannes Vermeer (1632-75) from The Leiden Collection went on display at the National Museum of China (NMC) in Beijing on Saturday as part of the largest exhibition of Dutch Golden Age paintings ever held in China.

Co-hosted by the NMC and The Leiden Collection, founded by US entrepreneur and collector Dr Thomas S. Kaplan and his wife, with support from the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in China, the exhibition, entitled *Rembrandt And His Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection*, features 74 works from some 20 artists who were active during the Dutch Golden Age, including 11 paintings by Rembrandt, a Flemish Baroque master of light and shadow who later influenced Vincent van Gogh and Pablo Picasso.

During the Golden Age, the Netherlands' military power, science and art reached its peak, "of which we are very proud," Paul Menkveld, Chargé d'Affaires a.i. of the Dutch Embassy in Beijing, said at a press conference for the exhibition on Thursday.

After moving on from the Louvre at the end of May, the exhibition doubled the number of works for its China showing. This is not the only change. The Beijing exhibition also stands apart in that it presents a focused history of the 17th-century Dutch art and important artists such as Rembrandt "from the start till the end of his career," Lara Yeager-Crasselt, the exhibition's curator, told the Global Times on Thursday.

Arranged chronically starting from Rembrandt's days in Leiden to Amsterdam and classified according to the genre of paintings, the exhibit showcases how the use of shadows, colors and brushstrokes developed in the artist's paintings throughout his career up until the point



Top: *Minerva in Her Study* by Rembrandt van Rijn

Photo: Courtesy of The Leiden Collection

Thomas S. Kaplan

Photo: Courtesy of Sueraya Shaheen

GOLDEN AGE MEMORIES

he developed "a rather modern way of painting," Yeager-Crasselt said.

Universal artist

Aside from Rembrandt, a majority of works shown at the NMC exhibition are from his contemporaries including Johannes Vermeer, Jan Lievens (Rembrandt's studio-mate), Pieter Lastman (Rembrandt and Lievens' teacher) and also Gerrit Dou, Rembrandt's first pupil.

Ranging from genre paintings to historical paintings, the exhibition shows several rare paintings from The Leiden Collection.

Encompassing some 250 Dutch paintings from the 17th century, The Leiden Collection, named after Rembrandt's birthplace, is regarded as one of the world's largest and most important private collection of Dutch Golden Age art. In keeping with their belief that "art is to



be shared," the Kaplans have been anonymously loaning these paintings to museums around the world for years.

The significance of Rembrandt, Thomas Kaplan said, is that "he was 200 years ahead of his time before Impressionism, another couple of hundreds of years before Expressionism."

"Rembrandt is an artist that is truly universal," said Kaplan, explaining why he

believes Chinese visitors to the exhibition will be able to connect with the artist.

Starting to collect paintings from the Dutch Golden Age in his 40s, the 55-year-old American collector, who has a PhD in history, said he first became fascinated with Rembrandt at age 6. Since then he has carried an appreciation for the artist's works throughout his life. Looking to share that appreciation with the world, Kaplan said that the goal of the tour this year is to build bridges between cultures and "remind people of our common humanity."

Slice of life

"They [Dutch Golden Age artists] were free to pursue art, not the dictates of the Church or even the classical artistic conventions that you saw in Italy and Spain," the collector said at Thursday's press conference. "But the Dutch artists started to see beauty in very

different ways through the land of everyday people doing everyday things."

Many of the 74 works on display feature ordinary Dutch men and women, as well as scenes from the everyday lives of Dutch families. From the thrilling joy of a singing musician to the loving interactions between an old couple, the details of the time are brought to life through the painters' fine brushstrokes and realistic style.

Even figures in the portraits of aristocratic women and ancient goddesses, such as Rembrandt's *Minerva in Her Study*, were often painted as ordinary Dutch women.

"Rather than depicting her [Minerva, the ancient Roman goddess of wisdom] as an idealized figure, Rembrandt painted her as a real woman," and thereby "the genre of historic paintings was completely transformed," Yeager-Crasselt said during Friday's preview exhibition.

The exhibit also shines with a few rarely seen masterpieces, such as *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal* by Johannes Vermeer – renowned for his *Girl with a Pearl Earring* – the artist's only mature-period work in private hands.

Friday's preview exhibition attracted a number of Chinese art professionals and enthusiasts who have also been influenced by these Dutch painters.

"Today I finally saw with my own eyes a genuine Rembrandt, the guy that my teacher kept bragging about during class... it was truly amazing," Wei Juexiao, a Beijing-based art graduate, told the Global Times at the preview exhibition on Friday.

"The most impressive Rembrandt style is the so-called triangle lighting often seen in his paintings, especially portraits," noted Wei, referring to Rembrandt Lighting, a widely popular lighting technique first applied by the Dutch artist.

According to the organizers, the exhibition, scheduled to close on September 3, will continue to tour to Shanghai, Russia and the Louvre Abu Dhabi.

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Thomas S. Kaplan Photo: Courtesy of Sueraya Shaheen.

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