

## Investor's passion for art to get its biggest audience yet

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US art collector Tom Kaplan holds Vermeer's "Young Woman Seated at a Virginal," one of the masterpieces from the Leiden Collection exhibition at the National Museum in Beijing. China is the first stop on a world tour of the works which will include a showing in Shanghai. — AFP

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 work 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 with around 70 of its more than 250 works on show until September 3 in the National Museum in central Beijing.

China is the first stop on a world tour of what is 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, officials say, 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 through its doors.

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

It is a major step toward 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 in China.

"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," he said.

Kaplan expresses a fervent belief in the transformative power of art, promoting his favorite painter with an almost missionary zeal.

He discovered the artist during a visit to the New York Museum of Metropolitan Art when he was 6 years old, sparking a lifelong obsession with the Dutch master.

He and his wife began collecting Rembrandts after a chance encounter in 2003 with an art expert who told him many of the paintings were in private hands and available for purchase.

The couple soon began snatching up works from the era, buying "on average a painting a week for five years," Kaplan said.

He believes Rembrandt's power lies in his universality and the revolutionary message hidden in his work. "Beauty is truth. It's humanity. That's our salvation," he said.

"We believe very strongly that perhaps uniquely Rembrandt can serve as (a) bridge," he said. "(Rembrandt) is truly a universal artist from whose DNA we've seen art all over the world be able to find its freedom and liberation."