

Remarks by Dr. Thomas S. Kaplan

*Rembrandt and His Time:
Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection*

– Launch Ceremony –

National Museum of China

Beijing, People's Republic of China

16 June 2017

“Not what I have, but what I do is my kingdom.”

Your Excellencies, Director Lv Zhangshen, Deputy Director Chen Lyusheng and all of our distinguished partners at the National Museum of China, Yin Jun and the Government of the People’s Republic of China, Senator Ben Knapen and Chargé d’Affaires Paul Menkveld the other esteemed representatives of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Colleagues and Friends...

Standing here before you to celebrate the opening of the Leiden Collection’s exhibition at the National Museum of China is certainly one of the greatest honors of my life. It is nothing short of thrilling to have the august privilege of bringing our Rembrandts, Vermeer and other masters of the Golden Age to Beijing for the largest survey of Dutch art ever convened in China. This thrill alone would be reason enough for my wife Daphne and me to share the Collection with the people of China.

We, however, see the journey of discovery that begins with tonight’s Beijing opening as much more momentous. It is the fullest expression of what we hold to be *an historic chance* to seize the opportunities that come from being among the most enthusiastic collectors of Rembrandt in the four centuries since his birth. The first of these opportunities is to be able to pay true homage to the artist who most changed the medium of painting *forever* and *for everyone*, impacting our collective understanding of the very *meaning* of art. The second opportunity – though perhaps more a privilege – is the one which follows from the responsibility and resources we happen to possess as collectors: that is, to play a role in connecting the Chinese *people* to Rembrandt as an artist who was influential in changing not just the West’s attitude towards art but, in the context of his enduring impact on the *global* artistic community, *China’s* world as well.

This ambitious assertion rests on two foundations: Rembrandt’s contribution to the arc of art history, and also the way in which he is almost Chinese in his approach to art. As you will see in this Exhibition, Rembrandt is unequalled in his mastery of the use of light to achieve both literal and figurative illumination. Moreover, you will note his ability to connect intimately with his subjects’ interior life in a distinctly revolutionary way, and that he did so generations – indeed centuries – before the advent of impressionism and expressionism.

As to Rembrandt's Chinese qualities, I'll leave it to the great contemporary artist David Hockney to address this point, which he did in an interview as recently as September 2016:

“Rembrandt put more in the face than anyone else ever has, before or since, because he saw more.... That was to do with his heart. The Chinese say you need three things for paintings: the hand, the eye and the heart. I think that remark is very, very good. Two won't do. A good eye and heart is not enough, neither is a good hand and eye. It applies to every drawing and painting Rembrandt ever made. His work is a great example of the hand, the eye – and the heart. There is incredible empathy in it.”

In this, Hockney was surely right. Yet Rembrandt was really his own reference point. With his use of thick paint and broad brushstrokes, Rembrandt broke the bounds of convention and unleashed the imagination of the painter to cast off the classical limitations of expression and aesthetics in order to illuminate a deeper narrative. Sir Herbert Read put it beautifully when he said that *“Rembrandt was...a universal spirit, and this spirit informs everything that he painted.”* That universality was, to put it in today's terminology, a “game changer”...and accounts for why Rembrandt's one word name remains so uniquely evocative today. It also accounts for why we often say that it takes a genius to *be* Rembrandt, not to buy his work.

Some artists are simply so extraordinary that they revolutionized not merely their medium, but in their transcendence, they changed the world. From Van Gogh and Picasso to the renowned Chinese contemporary artist Zeng Fanzhi, Rembrandt's inspired approach to defining Truth seemed to channel the abiding Confucian concept that *“everything has beauty, but not everybody sees it.”* This iconoclasm, completely original in his day, became an intrinsic source of strength for so many of the most influential figures in art that followed him. His “genetic markers” can thus be found in almost all that we consider art today. In this fashion, he may be seen to belong to China as much as he belongs to Holland. Indeed, speaking as an American, he belongs to us all.

It certainly helps our cause that, as our exhibition curator Lara Yeager-Crasselt elegantly conveyed in her catalogue essay, the Dutch Golden Age represented the first significant contact between the Netherlands and China. More than any other European society during this period, the Dutch evinced the strongest and deepest interest in the knowledge of Chinese culture and traditions. In the seventeenth century, it was the cultural world of Europe – and the Dutch Republic above all –

that was transformed by engaging with China and, more broadly, Asia.

It is nothing short of the return of this embrace, centuries later, that is our objective. As I wrote in the Foreword to our exhibition catalogue it is my conviction that *“the renaissance of the great civilization that is China is arguably the most significant phenomenon of our generation...and represents a defining moment in history in all fields of endeavor.”* This century is clearly China’s. I for one personally applaud China choosing to be among the leaders of the world community in taking on critical issues of the day, including climate change. Moreover, I am reminded that President Xi used the following words at the Asia Pacific summit in Lima, Peru last year: *“We should commit ourselves to building a community of shared future. This will bring us closer instead of keeping us apart.”* We couldn’t agree more. Indeed, several months ago, in remarks I made at the opening of our exhibition at The Louvre Museum in Paris, I spoke with similar language of my family’s *“using the most powerful tools we have at our disposal, Rembrandt and our passion, to build upon the connections that bind people together rather than tear them apart”* ...and to nurture relentlessly humanism and its most noble offspring: tolerance and mutual respect.

Likewise, we believe that Lao Tzu was absolutely correct when he said *“The wise man does not lay up his own treasures. The more he gives to others, the more he has for his own.”* Should my wife and I have the good fortune to accomplish the ambitious feat of contributing a novel avenue for East to meet West via the bridge of Rembrandt, then we will know that, as collectors, we have found a purpose that transcends the mere accumulation of objects. We will have helped secure the legacy of Rembrandt in the most dynamic region of the world. And we will have successfully *used* art to promote greater understanding between cultures, that fundamental Alliance of Civilizations which points to our common humanity. We believe we are off to a good start. Can there be anything more idealistically universal in its message and indeed its reach than the sight of *American Jews* employing *Dutch Art* arriving from an exhibition at the most iconic *French* museum to build common ground with *China, Russia, and the Arab World?*

It is perhaps not an accident that my family’s greatest passions are harnessing the power of art and, now more than ever, wildlife conservation in order to promote our vision. Both represent what we seek to teach our children... the aspiration to speak to one’s higher self, to make a life over making a living. And both rely on “giving back” and cooperation. Sharing is everything to us...as is partnership...especially as we see it as a model that works. In wildlife conservation, the affiliates we have created, Panthera, and endowed, including

Oxford University's Wildlife Conservation Research Unit, have changed the trajectory of the fate of big cats and the critical habitats they share with humans. To that end, we have built a global alliance to accomplish this objective, and our reach comprises a hundred partnerships in more than 50 countries around the world. We are thrilled to be engaging with some of China's most notable conservationists on tigers and snow leopards and it is our hope and intention to add China to our network. I believe that China could one day emerge as a global leader in wildlife conservation. Having built my career on precisely just this kind of unconventional thinking – a career whose fruits have enabled my wife and me to become both the most enthusiastic buyers of the art we love *and* the most determined funders of wild cat conservation – I truly feel that, in collaboration with emerging, like-minded Chinese philanthropists, we can accomplish what today may seem unbelievable. As we have found in all our endeavors, however, the key is *starting...and carrying through*. That is the critical path to success. For, as the historian Thomas Carlyle put it so beautifully: “*Not what I have but what I do is my kingdom.*”

Of course, “doing” is rarely ever a solitary undertaking. And making this extraordinary exhibition possible was no exception. I would like to begin by thanking our partners at the National Museum of China, starting with Director Lu and Deputy Director Chen, without whom this show would simply not have been possible, the Museum's outstanding Curatorial Affairs and Exhibition Design Department, and indeed the entirety of this fabulous institution. Their professionalism, combined with that of the Leiden team in New York, have created a show that is as beautiful as it is pioneering. My and Daphne's gratitude to the brilliant Maxim Parr and Johnny Van Haften is unbounded. Their supreme dedication to creating such a sensational bridge to China – in tandem with our friends at the embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Christie's China, Artemisia, and Ruder Finn – is a testament to their commitment not only to us, but to China itself. Daphne and I are indebted to every one of you for the passion and tremendous efforts that resulted in this magnificent occasion. Most importantly, we extend our profoundest thanks to the People's Republic of China for the hospitality and partnership that have enabled us all to realize this noble vision.