

**Remarks by Dr. Thomas S. Kaplan**

*Rembrandt, Vermeer and the Dutch Golden Age  
Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection and the Musée du Louvre*

– Opening Ceremony –

Louvre Abu Dhabi

Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

13 February 2019

[Check against delivery]

## A Tribute to Tolerance

Your Highnesses,  
Your Excellencies,  
Dear friends,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It will come as no surprise to those who know my wife Daphne and me that the exhibition being inaugurated this evening truly represents one of our greatest ‘passion projects’. For, to make it very clear, my family genuinely considers Louvre Abu Dhabi to be the single most important cultural initiative of our generation. *Je pèse mes mots*. Highlighting the common bonds of global culture — just down the road from the devastation of Mosul — this museum, with its Christian antiquities and illuminated Hebrew manuscripts residing side by side with Islamic art, is a uniquely brave and enormously consequential experiment.

Evincing the United Arab Emirates’ resolve to share not only mutual interests but also common values with the West, we recognize in the aftermath of the tragic fall of Palmyra the triumphant juxtaposition of the rise of Louvre Abu Dhabi. This magnificent homage to humanism and tolerance — Jean Nouvel’s *chef-d’œuvre* — constitutes the rarest flowering of both determined idealism and inspired leadership. The world needs more of this. As my friend Yousef Al Otaiba, the UAE’s ambassador to the United States, declared in the context of Pope Francis’ visit to the Emirates just last week: “There is no clash of civilizations or ideas – only a rash of ignorance and a deficit of courage and moral leadership.” To this call, I would indeed respond: could there be a more appropriate *riposte* to the cultural cleansing of Aleppo or Timbuktu, than the sight of Paris and Abu Dhabi joining hands tonight, with Americans, to use the soft power of Dutch art to defeat nativism and obscurantism — not in a clash of civilisations, but in an Alliance of Civilisations?

Speaking for my family, our commitment to the Alliance of Civilisations is adamant. And nowhere is it more clearly expressed than in our dedication to support the cornerstone partnership between France — *notre deuxième maison* — and the UAE. While Abu Dhabi holds a unique place in my heart for many reasons, at the core of this affection lies a deep connection with, and faith in, the profound wisdom of the country’s leadership. I am an unabashed admirer of His Highness the Crown Prince, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. I have long held him in a special firmament, alongside visionaries such as Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore and indeed Sheikh Mohamed’s own father, the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, founder of this beautiful nation.

From the moment my dear friend, my brother, His Excellency Khaldoon Khalifa Al Mubarak, introduced us, the friendship that has been forged with Sheikh Mohamed constitutes one of the greatest joys of my life. In fact the spirit of camaraderie that characterises all of my relationships in the Emirates is the strongest and most comprehensive that I have yet enjoyed with any partners. Across an exceptionally wide arc of activities, I have found the bonds that we have shared to be among the most genuine throughout both my personal and professional lives. In a number of circles I am even called ‘the Emirati’. It is a badge of honor that I wear with enormous pride... unadulterated pride in country being a rare privilege in today’s world.

Given such immutable Franco-Emirati affinities, it was thus not an accident that the very first unveiling of The Leiden Collection would occur at the Louvre in Paris. It is not by chance that Panthera, our wildlife conservation initiative in which Abu Dhabi is our cornerstone strategic partner, has been blessed with multiple French affiliations and alliances. Nor is it a coincidence that we are actively engaged with ALIPH, the Franco-Emirati enterprise to protect cultural heritage from the ravages of conflict — a foundation which I have the pleasure of serving as Chairman, and whose distinguished Board members are honoring us with their presence this evening.

The exhibition ‘Rembrandt, Vermeer and the Dutch Golden Age’ represents a continuation of this dynamic. It also reflects rather well my family’s philanthropic ethos, an approach which Tolstoy captured so beautifully: “Joy can only be real if people look upon their life as a service and have a definite object in life outside themselves and their personal happiness.” That ‘object in life’ is, for us, giving back through the conservation of mankind’s precious inheritance — namely, our environmental and cultural endowments. And it is about the safeguarding of the universal values — above all, tolerance and mutual respect — which makes our passionate promotion of such an agenda even remotely possible. Cynicism, so much in vogue, simply does not work for us. In fact, we reject it completely. Truth be told, our interest in the Dutch Golden Age — an era of fantastic creative outburst and prosperity — owes as much to the fundamental values and principled aspirations that characterized 17th-century Holland, as to our appreciation for the sublime abilities and artistic genius of the likes of Vermeer.

And then there is Rembrandt. Some artists are simply so extraordinary that they changed not merely their medium but, in their transcendence, they changed the world. Thus, just as Shakespeare is Shakespeare, and Bach is Bach, so Rembrandt is Rembrandt. Adopting the famous words of André Malraux, according to whom the Master from Leiden was “the first to touch the soul with his painting”, one can readily understand why Rembrandt was so ahead of his time and why, 350 years since his passing, the Master’s legacy lives on so remarkably. For if one imagines the transmission of the Master’s artistic DNA from the seventeenth century through to those whom he inspired — from Goya, Delacroix, Van Gogh, Turner, Picasso, Rodin, and Bacon, all the way to contemporary Chinese masters such as the renowned Zheng Fanzhi and Liu Dan — Rembrandt’s genetic markers can be understood to reside in virtually all that we consider art today...everywhere.

He is Dutch. He is Chinese. He is Russian. He is Arab. When President Macron, echoing Dostoyevsky, declared right here at the opening of Louvre Abu Dhabi in November 2017 that maybe ‘Beauty will save the world’, he might well have claimed that perhaps “*Rembrandt* will save the world.” For Beauty is Truth, and it is a certain Truth that makes Rembrandt so touching, so inspirational to artist and layman alike. While the splendor of an artist that touches the soul may not alone be able to save the world, perhaps great art in general, and that universal genius Rembrandt in particular, can indeed play a critical role in what Jews call *tikkun olam* – or ‘repairing the world’.

Of course, no ‘passion project’, or labor of love, happens on its own. ‘Doing’ is rarely ever a solitary undertaking. Daphne and I first wish to acknowledge the wonderful generosity of our partners at Louvre Abu Dhabi – in particular His Excellency Mohamed Khalifa Al Mubarak, Chairman of the Department of Culture and Tourism, whose vision inspired this exhibition, and his sterling Undersecretary, His Excellency Saif Saeed Ghobash. We also wish to thank their team,

led by the museum's Director, Manuel Rabaté. From the Louvre and its French museum colleagues, we express our appreciation to Vincent Pomarède and his team, the exhibition's Co-Curator, Blaise Ducos, as well as our gratitude for the truly outstanding work of Agence France-Muséums, especially Alice Rivollier, Veronique Declercq, and Aurore Tisserand.

Surely our highest and most heartfelt praises will go to our own Collection team, led by the brilliant Lara Yeager-Crasselt, Co-Curator of the exhibition, and its singular collection of stars: Sara Smith, Katy Spurrel, Alexa McCarthy, and Erin Farrell — all of whom embraced this journey to Arabia with exceptional grace and professionalism, coming as it did immediately after a hectic but triumphant tour through Paris, Beijing, Shanghai, Moscow, and the Hermitage, where the exhibition enjoyed well over a million visitors. We also recognize the astonishing Alison Buchbinder and the Polskin team, along with our dear colleagues based in New York — with special mention to Ambassador Mark Wallace, Antoine Artiganave, Andy Shapiro, Amy Zoler, Ali Erfan, and Felicity Twort — whose dedication and *élan* have meant the world to us. In all of this, we and indeed all collaborators around the world were nourished by the beating heart of this campaign – the utterly magnificent Johnny Van Haefen, a friend as unique as he is true.

We also wish to acknowledge the pivotal contributions that each of the following individuals have made in this exhibition coming to pass: Jean-François Charnier, whose openness of spirit and genius of mind will never, ever be forgotten; Ina Giscard d'Estaing, my Golden Ticket, and the genuine soul of our connection to the Louvre; and the elegance of *Président-directeur* Jean-Luc Martinez, without whose deeply rooted values and class this show would not have been possible.

Lastly, in the spirit of the French educator Jean Massieu, who famously declared “*La reconnaissance est la mémoire du cœur*” (Gratitude is the memory of the heart), allow me to extend, yet again, my profoundest gratitude to His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and to the people of the United Arab Emirates, for the extraordinary friendship, hospitality, and affection that they have shown to my immediate and extended family, and for the shared vision that has today enabled all of us to realise this noble mission.

[End]