

Billionaire art collector Thomas Kaplan on working with Sheikh Mohamed and why he loves the UAE

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Thomas Kaplan with Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces. Courtesy Brunswick PR.

Billionaire Thomas Kaplan has one vice; a lavish habit that's cost him a veritable fortune over his lifetime: the American businessman simply cannot get enough of Rembrandt van Rijn.

It's an obsession the New York native became consumed by when he was just six years old, and one that lay dormant, as investments in natural resources inflated his net worth to rival that of a small country.

With wealth came Kaplan's first foray into the art world – the purchase of a small, £150,000 (Dh710,508) portrait of Dirck van Beresteyn by Gerrit Dou, also known as Rembrandt's first-ever pupil.

Not quite a Rembrandt, no, but in the years since, Kaplan and his wife have gone on to amass one of the largest private collections of Dutch Golden Age masterpieces in the world – including the largest collection of privately-held Rembrandts.

During a five-year stint of accelerated spending, Kaplan was buying one masterpiece a week, on average. And yet, in order to reject materialism, he has never lived with a single one of the paintings, and chooses to share them with the world instead.

'My dream project is in Abu Dhabi'

Kaplan is at the helm of the Leiden Collection, which comprises more than 250 prized paintings and drawings, including 40 per cent of the Rembrandts that are in private hands, and the only privately-held Vermeer. His latest exhibit has toured the largest three art museums in the world — adorning the walls of the Louvre, the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, and Beijing's National Museum of China in quick succession.

But since day one, he's been gunning for one destination. "I said in Paris two years ago at the opening, that my dream project is in Abu Dhabi," he tells *The National*. "And that was before this museum was finished."

The museum in reference is Louvre Abu Dhabi; the final destination for his latest touring exhibit – Rembrandt, Vermeer and the Dutch Golden Age: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection and the Musée du Louvre. At its centre is the study, *Head of a Young Man in Prayer* (circa 1655), a rare oil sketch by Rembrandt acquired by Louvre Abu Dhabi, which will henceforth be on permanent display.

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Indeed, Kaplan's love for the UAE runs almost as deep as his love for fine art. Shared interests in heritage and wildlife conservation have led to a close relationship with Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE's Armed Forces, and an affinity for the Emirates.

Louvre Abu Dhabi is an apt place for Kaplan's collection to come full circle: "This is an institution that I genuinely believe in, and what it's trying to accomplish is the most important cultural initiative of our generation," he says.

Kaplan considers his collection a "lending library", one that heads out on the road for long periods of time (this exhibit began two years ago at the Louvre in Paris).

Considering he once vehemently rejected the notion of ever becoming an art collector, but has certainly done quite the about-face. "It was my wife's mother who said to me, 'you should become a collector, because you love history and you love art and you'll enjoy it'," he laughs, taking in the invaluable works now before him. "I said I will *never* become an art collector - I rejected the materialism."

And yet, Kaplan can trace his own love for Rembrandt back to when he was aged six, on a visit to New York's Metropolitan Museum with his mother – far before his billionaire status. He doesn't know why it was the Dutch painter and printmaker who he connected with so profusely; what he does know, is that it quickly became an obsession. "My mother tried to wean me off Rembrandt, to expand my palate. I rejected her.

"She took me to MoMa and I remember standing in front of a white canvas with a red line and I just said 'no, take me back to Rembrandt'."

And the rest, as they say, is history.

How to become a billionaire

Kaplan went on to Oxford University, where he earned his bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees in history. He met his wife, Dafna Recanati (the daughter of Israeli investor Leon Recanati) while earning his PhD.

Kaplan made a name for himself when he correctly predicted Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait several years before it happened – an event most people at the time thought implausible. It was a skill

similarly invaluable to the world of investment, and Kaplan was snapped up by Israeli investor Avi Tiomkin, who hired him as a junior partner in 1991.

Kaplan established himself as a master of the boom-to-bust market cycle. He once again proved his prowess in financial forecasting and invested heavily in silver and zinc in the '90s, discovering and financing one of the largest producers of silver and zinc in the world.



Thomas Kaplan has brought the Leiden Collection, which represents 40 per cent of privately owned Rembrandts, to Louvre Abu Dhabi. Reem Mohammed / The National.

In 2000, he turned his sights to gold, and went on to forge interests with companies that own several of the largest proven gold resources in the world. His diverse career has been brimming with entrepreneurship, and the accrual of vast amounts of wealth, but it wasn't until 2017 until Kaplan's fortune really skyrocketed, when he sold his hydrocarbon exploration company's natural gas assets for \$2.55 billion (Dh9.4b).

By then, Kaplan's art collection was already extensive.

Journey into collecting art

Kaplan is effervescent as he bounds about the halls of his exhibit at Louvre Abu Dhabi. Dressed in his signature three-piece suit, he strides over to show off the painting that started it all: the small, oval Dou portrait – which is positively dwarfed by the more recent acquisitions that adorn the walls around it.

It's clear this original piece still holds a special place in Kaplan's heart; so much so that, as he's gesticulating about its backstory, he gets close enough to it to set off the alarm. It was a fortuitous acquisition, he explains while jumping back from the beeping painting. In fact, at the time, it was a veritable steal.

"A dealer in London had it, and it was only attributed to Dou ... the expert on Dou said they couldn't provide attribution because there's no comparable for it."

The issue was, it was the only Dou presented on silver copper alloy, and not wood panel. But what might have been a risky move for anyone else, became another triumph in fortune telling for Kaplan. "Because I made my original fortune in silver, I was convinced that this was a good omen."



Mr Kaplan's collection also includes a Dh710,000 portrait of Dirck van Beresteyn by Gerrit Dou, also known as Rembrandt's first pupil. Courtesy Leiden Collection.

And so it was. After Kaplan picked up the painting for a relatively meager £150,000, the curator admitted the painting was, in fact, a verified Dou. Kaplan was hooked.

Over a subsequent summer in the south of France with a broken knee, Kaplan shipped in and read "every book of the Leiden school and Rembrandt" that he could find. "For the next five years we bought on average a painting a week," Kaplan recalls wistfully. "It took a few years before we bought our first Rembrandt.

"I thought 'it's never going to get better than this'. I never thought I'd own a Rembrandt – and if someone had said to me 'you'll one day have 40 or 50 per cent of those in private hands,' I would have said 'that's delusional'."

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Kaplan and his wife have since made quick work of hoovering up Dutch Golden Age art, including thirteen paintings from the entire career arc of Dou, as well as works from Johannes Vermeer and Frans Hals. He now owns 13 verified Rembrandts, who he continues to revere as the "seminal revolutionary".

The couple did so under the guise of anonymity for 15 years, naming their collection after Rembrandt's birthplace. "It wasn't just so we could acquire paintings, it was the rejection of materialism for its own sake – which is why we never lived with any of the paintings. We had a Rubicon moment, and that was when we made the decision that not only should we be sharing the paintings, but the fact we have so many under one roof which offered a unique opportunity to put the whole collection out there."

That decision was solidified when Kaplan loaned out one of his paintings – Jan Lievens' *Boy in a Cape and Turban; Portrait of the Prince Rupert of the Palatinate* – to the Getty Museum in California. It was there where he watched a young girl hang back from her school group, intensely studying the painting. Kaplan viewed it as a sign.

"We went from complete anonymity and shunning any reference to us as collectors, to almost a free-for-all," he says, though he still to this day remains notoriously difficult to pin down for an interview – typically only speaking to journalists at the opening of one of his exhibits. It's something of an oxymoron considering how passionate he is in conversation, and how forthcoming with information he is.

"I just said, if we're not willing to embrace not just what we've done, but who we are and therefore why we've done this, then we shouldn't put the information out there."

'The UAE is my closest partner in life, aside from my wife'

About a decade ago, Kaplan was first introduced to the UAE on business. It was an encounter that spawned a number of close partnerships with Sheikh Mohamed Bin Zayed.

"What he was trying to accomplish for his country, and the idea that the UAE should represent a different model... it very quickly became apparent from the time that I met the Crown Prince," he says. "Now, we never discuss business, ever. We've become partners in so many ways and my admiration for him has nothing to do with business interests whatsoever. Nobody can buy me – I can't be bought."

Over the years, Kaplan has come back to the UAE over two dozen times, for myriad reasons. But what remains constant, is his admiration for what the country is trying to achieve in cultural tolerance. To be part of that vision is "epic", he says.

"The pressures on this kind of philosophy, with the radicalism of Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood, is extraordinary. It would be so much easier for the country to keep its head down and instead they stand up and say 'we are here'.

"The country, and the leadership [of the UAE] I would say are my closest partners in more facets of my life than anyone else other than my wife."



Mr Kaplan shows off part of his collection. Reem Mohammed / The National.

Kaplan has been the chairman of the International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas (ALIPH), a Geneva-based foundation established by France and the United Arab Emirates, since 2017. It's a position that Sheikh Mohamed placed him in, and an organisation formed through donations by the UAE, France, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Luxembourg. It's currently focused on the rehabilitation of the Mosul Museum and Mar Behnam Monastery in Iraq and restoring the Tomb of Askia in Gao, Mali.

A love for wildlife conservation

From conservation of culture, to nature, perhaps the only thing that could trump Kaplan's love of fine art, is wildlife conservation. It led him to found Panthera, the only organisation in the world devoted exclusively to the conservation of the world's 40 wildcat species. "The only thing for which I have an even greater passion for than art is wildlife conservation. People say well, what's the connection? And I say 'well, that's easy: beauty'".

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It's another initiative Sheikh Mohamed has been heavily involved in, and who Kaplan affectionately calls his "strategic partner in saving big cats around the world".

"It was what I originally wanted to do - but I didn't have the aptitude for it. Luckily, I made enough money to have a much greater impact and to enable others who do have the aptitude for it."

So, with all these various charitable and entrepreneurial ventures, Kaplan is surely among the most important philanthropists of his generation. But does he consider himself as such? Well, it takes a full 15 seconds of mulling over before he attempts to answer such a proposition.

"That word is thrown about so promiscuously," he says. "I don't describe myself as a philanthropist –people describe me as passionate.

"It doesn't take a genius to collect Rembrandt, it takes a genius to *be* Rembrandt."

What's next

The Louvre Abu Dhabi exhibit is here for 18 weeks, after a bumper season at The State Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg, Russia, where it welcomed 1.15 million people. It's a staggering amount of people; one that prompts wonder from even Kaplan himself. But he is quick to note it has nothing to do with a sense of personal gratification.

"It gives me immense joy, it's astonishing and exhilarating – but I can tell you that there is zero sense of pride. We do not take it personally. I love it because I am watching people engage with the art that I love, I'm having a vicarious thrill and yet I'm still part of it."

After Abu Dhabi, Kaplan admits the art will be "given a rest for a while".

Top of the agenda right now is seeking out collaborators, along with Sheikh Mohamed and a partner from India, on his global alliance for big cat conservation.

It's perhaps why Kaplan's parting comments seem apt: "Talk about psychic gratification," he says of a recent conservation partner he found by chance in China, while there for the art exhibit.

"You know - beauty will save the world."