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THE INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE FOR ART COLLECTORS

APRIL 2019



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REMBRANDT**

A BLOCKBUSTER SHOW AT THE
LOUVRE ABU DHABI

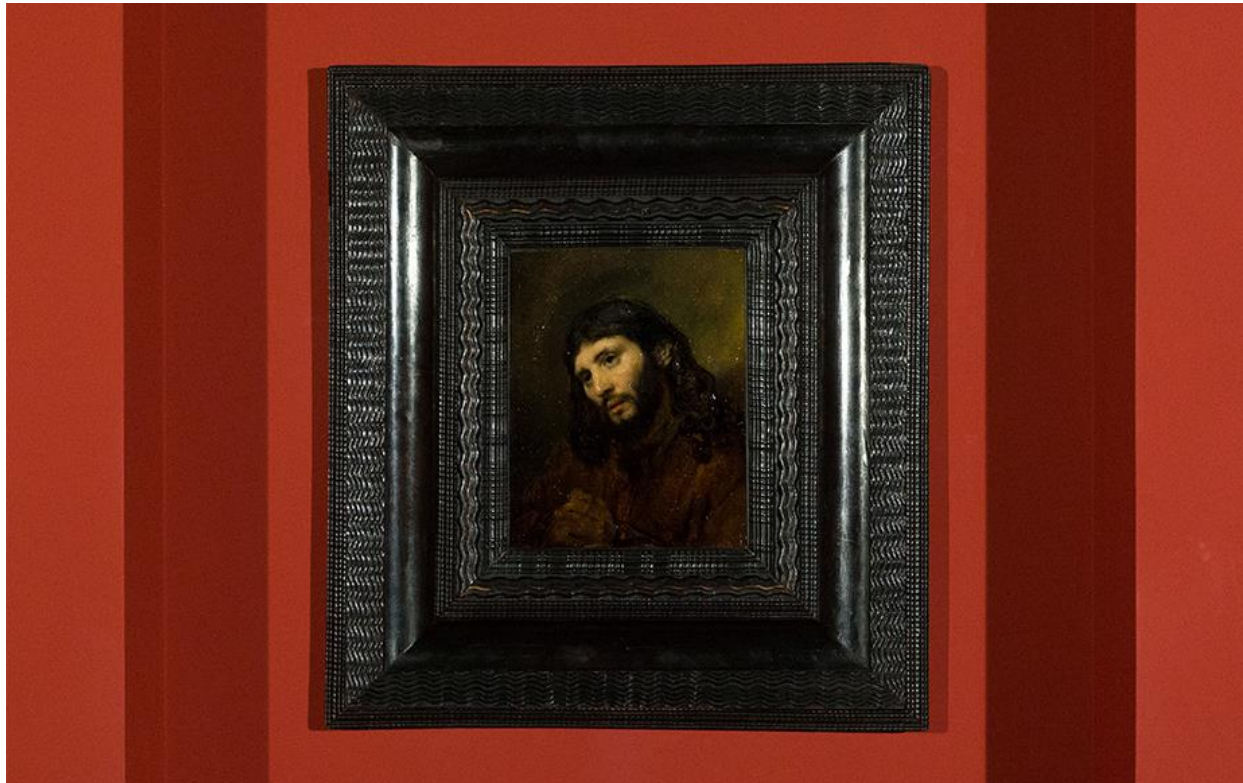
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An “Evangelical Mission” to Share Rembrandt With the World

BY NINA SIEGAL | APRIL 10, 2019



Rembrandt van Rijn, “Head of a young man, with clasped hands: Study of the Figure of Christ,” 1648–1656, oil and oak panel, 25.5 x 20.1 cm. (© Louvre Abu Dhabi / Photo by Seeing Things – Ismail Noor)

For the first 15 years that they were busy amassing one of the world’s most significant private collections of Dutch Golden Age art, Thomas S. Kaplan and his wife Daphne Recanati Kaplan kept a low profile, rarely identifying themselves as the owners of The Leiden Collection.

But since they decided to go public in late 2016, Kaplan, an American investor, has been on a self-described “evangelical mission” to share Rembrandt with the world. He has become a passionate spokesperson for the idea that “one can build bridges through art,” and because “Rembrandt is the universal artist,” he feels the painter is the ideal emissary to “strike a blow for universal values at that time when they don’t appear to be very much in vogue.”

Since 2017, Kaplan has sent paintings from The Leiden Collection on a tour around the world, first at the Musée du Louvre in Paris; then at the National Museum of China in Beijing and the Long Museum in Shanghai; and next in Russia, at the Pushkin Museum in Moscow and the State Hermitage in St. Petersburg.

Now, in time for Rembrandt Year 2019, a global commemoration of the 350th anniversary of the artist's death, Kaplan has brought his paintings to the Middle East for the very first time. The Louvre Abu Dhabi is presenting "Rembrandt, Vermeer and the Dutch Golden Age: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection and the Musée du Louvre," until May 18.

"The symbolism of American Jews being able to use Dutch art to weave together a common narrative in Europe, China and Russia and now in the Middle East is a statement," Kaplan said in an interview in Abu Dhabi before the opening of the show. "We see it as a rejection of cynicism. We see it as a way to be able to show that in an era of nationalism it can be beautiful to be patriotic, but we are ultimately humanists."

This stop in the Gulf region has been the most important to him of all the venues so far, said Kaplan, and he calls this particular show his "passion project." At the press conference before the opening, he said, "The Louvre Abu Dhabi represents, by far, the most important cultural initiative of our generation. This museum is a direct answer to the intolerance and the obscurantism of Palmyra," referring to the desecration of the Roman ruins by the Islamic State.

Kaplan is the chairman and one of the driving forces behind the International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas, known as ALIPH, which was created last year to address the destruction and looting of ancient art and artefacts by recent wars in the region.

In late December, President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan of the United Arab Emirates, who has been a vocal campaigner against Islamist movements in the Middle East, announced that 2019 would be the Year of Tolerance in his country. Kaplan said that this is part of the reason he wanted to bring his trove here. "I love the country, I love what it stands for and I love the courage it takes to have the willingness to build bridges and fight intolerance," said Kaplan, "especially in a region where the path of least resistance is to keep your head down."

The link between the Dutch Golden Age and the Emirates of today, for Kaplan and the curators of the exhibition, can also be distilled into a single word: Tolerance. “The notion the Dutch are mostly associated with in history is tolerance, the famous Dutch tolerance,” said Blaise Ducos, chief curator of Dutch and Flemish paintings at the Paris Louvre.

Among the highlights of the exhibition is the Louvre Abu Dhabi’s own recent Rembrandt acquisition, the first Rembrandt in its permanent collection, purchased at Sotheby’s London in December for £9.5 million (\$12.1 million): “Head of a young man, with clasped hands: Study of a Figure of Christ,” (circa 1648-56). Other extraordinary works include Rembrandt’s “Portrait of a Man in a Red Coat” (1633), “Study of a Woman in a White Cap” (1640), and a wonderful Lievens portrait, “Boy in a Cape and Turban,” (1631), as well as a Lievens self-portrait of 1629-30, all from The Leiden Collection.

Each exhibition in The Leiden Collection tour has been larger than the last. Paris presented about 33 works in a rather dark and hidden corner of the museum in 2017 while a few of the Leiden works were also displayed in the 2017 blockbuster showcase in the Napoleon Hall downstairs, “Vermeer and the Masters of Genre Painting.”

About 75 of Kaplan’s paintings were on display in China, said The Leiden Collection curator Lara Yeager-Crasselt, while in St. Petersburg, the Hermitage added its own paintings to the Leiden works for an exhibition of about 80 works.

The Louvre Abu Dhabi presents 95 works in total, including 16 paintings by Rembrandt in addition to 21 paintings, drawings and prints produced by Rembrandt and his workshop. Two rooms of the exhibition are devoted to the Leiden “fijnschilders,” or fine painters, such as Rembrandt’s studio mate Jan Lievens, his pupil Gerrit Dou and the artist Frans van Mieris who all made small paintings that depicted domestic scenes of ordinary life.

“It’s different from the one in Paris, first and foremost in scale, but also in spirit,” said Ducos in an interview. “Here, we’ve tried to present the backdrop of Dutch culture and their primacy in the world — how the Dutch prevailed in world trade at the time. We’re using trade and the entrepreneurial spirit as ways to draw attention to the works.”

The exhibition opens, for example, with a model of a Dutch trading ship on loan from Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum, which is displayed near 17th-century maps of the Netherlands and its global trade routes.

As at the Hermitage, the Louvre has loaned works that pair nicely with elements of Kaplan's trove, and that help illuminate some aspect of their creation. Johannes Vermeer's "Young Woman at a Virginal" (c. 1670 - 1672) from The Leiden Collection, for example, is displayed side-by-side with the Louvre's 1669-70 Vermeer painting, "The Lacemaker" — two portraits of a young woman at work, quite possibly depicting the same model.

Ducos said that scientific research conducted in 2010 and 2011 revealed that the two paintings were painted on the same bolt of canvas from Vermeer's studio.

Thomas Kaplan said he believes that Rembrandt and the other masters of his era achieved what they did only because of their openness, and willingness to see the world with new eyes, or what he calls, "the spirit of the Golden Age."

"When Holland threw off Spanish rule and was able to liberate itself artistically from Spanish and Italian and Catholic clerical conventions to be able to unleash a more humanistic approach to art, you have genre scenes, you have the celebration of everyday life in paintings," he said. "This is a revolution. People have to understand that the Dutch Golden Age was revolutionary, a humanistic revolution. That humanism all ties together."







