



# My Rembrandt and the enduring allure of the Old Master

A new documentary explores the special place of the Dutch painter in collectors' hearts

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Amsterdam art dealer and historian Jan Six XI with Rembrandt's 'Portrait of a Young Gentleman' (1635)  
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An anonymous castle. Night. A door creaks, a clock ticks. The camera pans in on a portrait, the face of an old woman, her hooded eyes looking down at the book in her hands. Every brushstroke reveals another almost miraculous detail. A middle-aged man sits silently, alone, in the fabulously lavish room, gazing at the picture hung high above an ornate fireplace.

It is Rembrandt's "An Old Woman Reading", although the film doesn't tell us that, and the setting is Drumlanrig Castle, Scottish home of the Duke of Buccleuch. The film doesn't tell us that either. We can glean the details later, or look them up if we care to. What director Oeke Hoogendijk concentrates on instead of such information, throughout her absorbing documentary *My Rembrandt*, is the passionate exchange between the viewer and the artist.

Or rather, between the owner and the artist. That little possessive pronoun in the film's title speaks volumes. Hoogendijk's cast turns out to include aristos and dealers, billionaires and restorers, experts and museum directors, all united by their obsession with Rembrandt, and their unquenchable desire to own one.

In Amsterdam, we meet someone whose family owns more than one. Jan Six is an art dealer, but of a special kind: art-world aristocracy. He is in fact Jan Six XI, the 11th in a direct father-to-son line descended from the prosperous merchant painted by Rembrandt in 1655 — a picture Simon Schama has called the finest portrait of the 17th century. We see the painting hanging in the family's home, a 56-room 17th-century Amsterdam mansion filled with Vermeer, Brueghel, Hals and Rubens as well as Rembrandts, where the youngest Jan grew up with Rembrandt for breakfast.

This lineage hasn't made him complacent: far from it. Jan Six is hungry; he loves "the hunt"; he is a bloodhound when on the trail of an important picture. He's eager to prove himself more than just a rich boy, too: "For years I've been struggling in my mind to prove that I know something about paintings in my own right," he told a New York Times interviewer.

In *My Rembrandt*, the director doesn't tell us this; she shows us. It is written on Six's face as he waits in silent agony for an expert's verdict on a picture he has bought at auction as "circle of Rembrandt". Is it, or isn't it, actually by the master himself?

The central drama of the film is an account of how, between 2014 and 2018, Six discovered not just one "new" Rembrandt, but two. The first, which he noticed in the online catalogue of German auction house, is a biblical scene, Jesus surrounded by an eager crowd. Six spotted, in one figure at the side, the to-him unmistakable features of the very young Rembrandt. Was it a self-portrait, in keeping with the artist's love of playfully inserting himself into his early paintings?

In the second, it was the lace collar. This grand portrait of a fashionable young man with flowing auburn curls to his shoulders, fiercely black-clad with an ornate white collar, could — to those in the know — easily be dated to 1633-35 by the style of the lace. (Fashion ruled supreme, in matters of collars.)



The Duke of Buccleuch is watched over by Rembrandt's 'An Old Woman Reading' (1655)

So, Six excitedly explains, it couldn't be "circle of Rembrandt", as the auction house labelled it when he acquired it in London for £137,000: at that date Rembrandt wasn't yet famous enough to have a "circle". More importantly, the collar is painted by a technique of black on white (rather than vice versa) special to the Dutch master. But mainly, Six looked at the picture and he *knew*. Simple, really.

The story of how that painting was authenticated, the media hubbub around it, how the Rembrandt expert Ernst van der Wetering worked out that it had been part of a larger work; the rows and accusations that followed: all this is the stuff of the film.

Meanwhile, enter Thomas Kaplan, a chirpy, almost boyish, 57-year-old American billionaire, as *nouveau* as Six is *ancien*, as outspoken and emotional as the Scottish duke is reticent — but fuelled by just the same fire.

With his wife Dafna, Kaplan has the world's largest private collection of Rembrandts (they have 11), among an overall holding of some 250 works of the Dutch Golden Age, including the only Vermeer still in private hands. Since 2003 the couple has been on one of the great art spending sprees; as he explains jauntily, they bought on average a work a week. And they have a mission.

Their "Leiden Collection", named after Rembrandt's birthplace, is at the service of the world's museums — effectively, Kaplan says, "a lending library for Old Masters". "Our sense of mission is to use Old Masters to promote humanism and its noble offspring:

tolerance and mutual respect,” he says at the launch of a show at the Louvre. To see his face glow with “joy, pride” when he talks about the day he realised he could own a Rembrandt is an eloquent piece of filmmaking.



Jan Six X with Rembrandt's 1654 portrait of his ancestor, Jan Six

Then there are the museum directors, for whom the acquisition of masterpieces is a matter of pride — not just institutional but, in the case of Rembrandt, national.

Baron Eric de Rothschild, in his Paris home stuffed with treasures, explains regretfully that his brother has a tax bill to settle and he has decided to sell two of the most exceptional Rembrandts ever to come on the market: the life-sized twin wedding portraits of Maerten Soolmans and Oopjen Coppit, painted in 1634. They have been hanging in his bedroom, on either side of his bed (he likes Oopjen more than Maerten, and suspects Rembrandt did too); now they are valued at €160m.

The museum directors get to work, as gimlet-eyed in their quest as Jan Six in his. The Louvre and the Rijksmuseum go head to head; neither can afford it; a diplomatic row starts to bubble. Eventually they decide to buy the pair of portraits jointly; a lot of ministers make a lot of speeches. Once again, across three and a half centuries, Rembrandt's ability to bring to life two rather ordinary burghers has the power to enthrall whole countries.

For anyone who feels the collector's urge — in anything, from cars to baseball cards — this is a fascinating film. As it is for those who don't have it but would like to understand it. With a light touch, Hoogendijk conveys the furious intensity Rembrandt inspires, at the nexus of passion, power and money, and within the arcane world of Old Master dealing.

In the end, she seems to be telling us, it's all about feeling. In his stately home groaning with flamboyant portraits and other treasures, ancestors around every corner, the Scottish duke quietly describes Rembrandt's little old woman, in her nun-like clothes, as "the most powerful presence in this house".

*Streaming and in cinemas from August 14*