



FINANCIAL
TIMES



Collector Thomas Kaplan on sending Rembrandts to Saudi Arabia The businessman has a rich private collection of Dutch Golden Age art, which he plans to show in the Gulf

Georgina Adam; September 3rd 2021

“I’ve been really looking forward to talking to you about Rembrandt!” says Thomas Kaplan, billionaire investor, philanthropist and owner of one of the world’s largest private collection of Dutch “Golden Age” paintings, including 17 works by Rembrandt. And yet not a single one of his 250-strong collection is in his home — they are lent out to museums or displayed in special exhibitions. “Neither my wife nor I feel we can or should live with our Rembrandts,” he says. “I do believe that we are only borrowing them, until they pass on to the next generation.” His whole 17th-century collection is free to view in a beautifully designed, informative online catalogue, The Leiden Collection.



‘Portrait of Antonie Coopal’ (1635) by Rembrandt and workshop © Courtesy of The Leiden Gallery

Why Leiden? That is the name of Rembrandt’s native city, also home to many of his talented contemporaries who Kaplan collects: Gerrit Dou, Jan Lievens, Frans van Mieris and others. Kaplan deliberately did not put his name on the grouping: “This is not about me as a collector, it’s about Rembrandt. He is the universal artist who influenced so many others, from Goya, van Gogh and Picasso to Jenny Saville.” We are speaking over the internet, with Kaplan in Boston (though he lives in New York); he is wearing a T-shirt beneath an open-necked shirt and looks much younger than his near-60 years. “I love all art, but I only wanted to own Dutch art . . . and the collection just grew and grew.”



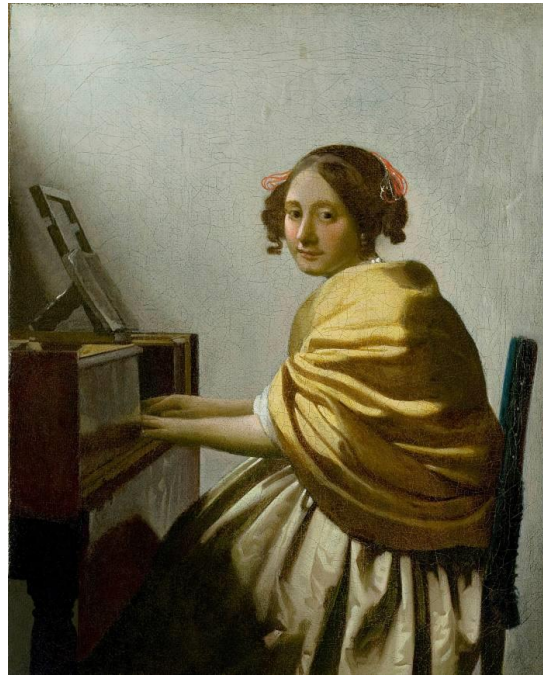
'Self-portrait' (c1629-30) by Jan Lievens © Greg Williams & 'Boy in a Cape and Turban (Portrait of Prince Rupert of the Palatinate)' (c1631) by Jan Lievens © Courtesy of The Leiden Collection (2)

To say he is talkative and enthusiastic is an understatement: in two hours' conversation, we cover everything from his passion for Rembrandt to Iranian politics, Jewish history, Islam, animal conservation and art dealers. He also revealed an audacious plan to show his collection in Saudi Arabia as part of a warm relationship he has built with the AIUla project, the kingdom's attempt to create a vast cultural quarter, and the Saudi royal family. Trained as a historian (his doctorate from Oxford university was on how commodities influence strategic planning), Kaplan made his fortune in natural resources — notably precious metals — and is founder and chair of investment advisers the Electrum Group. He comes from a cultivated, well-off family, but tells me that although his mother regularly took him to museums, they were not collectors, nor was he until his 40s. His wife Daphne has built up an important group of modernist furniture while also being deeply involved in the Leiden Collection.



'Portrait of Dirck van Beresteyn' (c1652) by Gerrit Dou © Courtesy of The Leiden Collection

His businesses having prospered, his first purchase from the Dutch Golden Age was a Gerrit Dou portrait. Working closely with dealers such as Otto Naumann and Johnny van Haften, he soon went on what he calls a “raid on Rembrandt”. Between 2003 and 2008 he was buying a painting a week: van Mieris, Gabriel Metsu, Jan Steen and many other contemporaries. While the collection is almost entirely focused on painting and portraiture, the first Rembrandt he acquired was a drawing, “Young Lion Resting” (1638-42), in 2005. From then on, he seemed unstoppable, acquiring in the end 17 Rembrandts, including “The Allegory of Smell” from the artist's earliest autograph works, The Five Senses (c1624-25). Kaplan also owns the only Vermeer believed to be in private hands, bought in 2008 as part of a deal with Las Vegas collector Steve Wynn to acquire Rembrandt's “Self-Portrait with Shaded Eyes” (1634).



'Young Woman Seated at a Virginal' (c1670-72) is believed to be the only Vermeer left in private hands © Courtesy of The Leiden Collection

Initially, the Kaplans kept private their relationship to the Leiden Collection, which was framed as a “lending library” and a study collection. “We didn’t want to be profiled as art collectors,” he says, “but once the online catalogue was published, we wanted to do it right. Until then no one knew the extent of our collection.” So he and his wife “came out of the closet” — his words. Selections were exhibited in the Louvre in 2017 and “once we had the imprimatur of the Louvre, the requests came in fast and furious”. Groups of works went to the National Museum of China in Beijing, the Long Museum in Shanghai, the Pushkin and Hermitage museums in Russia and the Louvre Abu Dhabi. The connection with the Middle East has proved fruitful and Kaplan has built a close relationship with Saudi Arabia. He is involved with the AIUla project, both through his chairmanship of International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas, also known as Aliph, and his work conserving the Arabian leopard. He actually signed an agreement in the desert with the Saudi minister of culture, Prince Badr bin Abdullah al-Saud, to support the conservation fund. “At the same time, Prince Badr asked me if I would consider holding a Rembrandt exhibition in Riyadh — it now is in the works and I expect an official announcement shortly,” Kaplan says, underlining how unprecedented it is for Saudi Arabia to host such a show.



Prince Badr bin Abdullah Al Saud, Saudi minister of culture and Thomas Kaplan celebrate their alliance to preserve the Arabian leopard in June 2019 © Courtesy of The Leiden Collection

The Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, is believed to have approved an operation in Turkey to “capture or kill” the journalist Jamal Khashoggi, according to a US intelligence report. I ask Kaplan if he had any international blowback from his connection with Saudi Arabia in view of this, or faced any problems in the Gulf because he is Jewish. “I have not,” says Kaplan. “To the contrary. They embrace me as a brother. Abu Dhabi and Saudi Arabia are really transforming the Gulf and this will have such an impact if the reforms can take hold,” he says, citing women’s rights and opening up Saudi Arabia to tourism. “I’m very close to the crown princes of both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates,” he continues, “and I share the values of their leadership. Mohammed bin Salman knows that he has done some unwise things and he has been over-zealous but he is doing something transformative to his country. He’s a game-changer, and has taken huge personal risks to implement his reform agenda.” Kaplan is one of the few collectors with the resources and drive to buy in to what is often regarded as an old-fashioned field. I ask him how younger collectors can be encouraged to enter and revive this market. His answer is brief: “It’s all about making these works of art relevant for future generations, and I am showing people what they didn’t know existed. That’s why the whole collection is available online, so everyone can enjoy it.”



Kaplan sold Leonardo's 'Head of a Bear' for £8.9m © Christie's Images

I also wonder why he did not keep Leonardo’s silverpoint “Head of a Bear” (c1590), which he sold at Christie’s in London in July 2021 for £8.9m. “It really doesn’t fit with my collection and, as a work on paper, it presented conservation challenges. With the money I sold it for, I was able to apply this to the purchase of two more Rembrandts this year,” he says. Those are the Middendorf Rembrandt, named for collector Bill Middendorf, a beautiful portrait of a young woman that appeared at Christopher Brown’s Young Rembrandt exhibition at the Ashmolean, and a newly attributed and signed bravura oil sketch of what is likely a young Jewish man. Then comes the inevitable question — what plans has Kaplan made for the future of the collection? “I think about this a lot,” he replies. “At the moment I don’t have an answer, I am exploring a couple of different concepts. My obligation is to Rembrandt, and that’s what counts — making him relevant to future generations. I want the collection to be an evangelist for his work, long after my own name is forgotten.”

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