

Sotheby's

Protective Spirit

BY ALEXANDER MORRISON | 11 AUGUST 2021

Thomas Kaplan on how his childhood passions for both big cats and Rembrandt paintings have framed his conservationism



Cover photo: Thomas Kaplan. Photo: The Leiden Collection

The connection between Thomas Kaplan's two greatest passions – Dutch Golden Age paintings and wildlife – may not seem visible to all. But to him, it's obvious. "I see the common denominator between the power of a Rembrandt and the power of when you first encounter a tiger in the wild," he says: "It's beauty."



A PAIR OF JAGUARS. PHOTO: PANTHERA

The entrepreneur, conservationist and art collector has committed himself to beauty of different kinds since he was six, the age he first encountered Rembrandt and slept in a bedroom “festooned with posters of leopards and tigers and jaguars”. Today, he owns the largest collection of Rembrandt’s work in private hands, oversees several charities including Panthera, a leading big cat conservation organisation, and serves as chairman of Aliph, a \$100 million fund designed to protect heritage in conflict zones.

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Kaplan's conception of beauty is broad, with rich intellectual roots: naturally tied to Rembrandt, who "threw off the conventional shackles of what was considered to be classical beauty"; but also to Fyodor Dostoevsky's claim "beauty will save the world", and to fellow Russian novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who believed in an ancient trinity of truth, goodness and beauty, but also that should the first two fail, beauty could fulfill the job of all three. For Kaplan, this unbridled potential of beauty can be applied to conservation: "If anything is going to save wildlife it's going to be by touching people's acceptance of [its] beauty, because as a species we don't have enough goodness to do it for the right reasons."



REMBRANDT VAN RIJN, *STONE OPERATION*
(*ALLEGORY OF TOUCH*), CIRCA 1624–25.
PHOTO: THE LEIDEN COLLECTION

Kaplan has taken this idea across the world, collaborating with leaders on projects such as Catmosphere, an initiative with Saudi Arabia to support cat conservation. He has also toured his Leiden Collection, featuring works by Rembrandt and also Metsu, Dow and Vermeer, using the opportunity to speak about these causes. He draws on the “intellectual capital” of different thinkers and professionals across his work, and when direct action is needed, is a strong believer in the power of asking people on the ground: “This is what we want to accomplish. What do you need?”

This drive has filtered through Kaplan’s family – his daughter convinced him to set up the Orienne Society in 2008, dedicated to preserving the indigo snake and now a leading reptile conservation charity. “I always say ‘better to live a day as a tiger than a thousand years as a man’, and that is something that I try to inculcate in my kids,” Kaplan says. “I think that if art collectors ask their children, ‘is there an animal that you would feel terrible about going extinct?’ and they were to actually do something about it, whatever their kids think of them, it’ll only be ameliorated by that act of generosity of spirit.”