

## World's 'most expensive painting for its size' on display at Hermitage Museum

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Rembrandt's Bust of a Bearded Old Man, The Leiden Collection Photo: S Boztas

The world's most expensive painting is going on show in Amsterdam – that is, apparently, if you are counting the price per square inch.

At a fraction less than 12 square inches (or 76 sq cm) Rembrandt's tiny [Bust of a Bearded Old Man](#) is one of the highlights in a [new display](#) at the Hermitage Amsterdam, Rembrandt & His Contemporaries.

With his eyes cast down and a single light source illuminating his features, the old man sketched out in Rembrandt's 1633 oil painting might be smaller than your smart phone – but he has an extraordinary power. This is one of 35 paintings on loan from the privately-owned Leiden Collection of Dutch 17<sup>th</sup> century art, returning to the Netherlands for the first time in decades.

'That was my great white whale,' Thomas S. Kaplan, owner of [The Leiden Collection](#), told Dutch News. 'Every year, most religiously, I would ask Sotheby's to ask the owner whether he would sell. At a certain point, I asked someone else, who knew the owner... and the owner gave him a price, take it or leave it.'

'I had a decision: to remember I paid apparently the highest price ever paid per square inch for a painting, or that I was the idiot who passed up on something I had been asking about for a decade and a half.'

## Obsession

Kaplan, an American billionaire art collector, who made his fortune in silver and zinc mines, bought the miniature that measures just 10.6 cm by 7.2cm, in 2018. A previous owner, Andrew W. Mellon, had made it a special velvet-clad travel box and it is displayed in this box in Amsterdam.

'I'm clearly not the only one who was obsessed with the painting,' said Kaplan. 'The case was created by Andrew Mellon, who was the treasury secretary, who gave almost the entirety of his art collection to create the National Gallery [of Art] in Washington, but he kept this, made this special case for it and travelled with it wherever he went. So I feel better about the obsession, knowing he took it to an even greater level.'

He did not disclose the price, but in 2009 a Rembrandt painting sold at Christie's for a record £20.2 million in London. Rembrandt's portraits of Maerten Soolmans and Oopjen Coppit were acquired by the Rijksmuseum and Musée du Louvre for €160 million in 2016.



Rembrandt's Minerva in her Study, 1635 @The Leiden Collection

## Hidden message

The new exhibition, which includes works by Rembrandt's teacher Pieter Lastman, pupils Ferdinand Bol, Carel Fabritius and Arent de Gelder, as well as history paintings by Frans van Nieris and Jan Steen, aims to show the importance of historical story-telling in 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch painting.

Marlies Kleiterp, head of exhibitions at Hermitage Amsterdam, said that these often allegorical paintings were considered the highest form of art at the time. Another highlight of the exhibition, Rembrandt's *Minerva in Her Study*, from 1635, doesn't just depict the Roman goddess of wisdom.

### **Exemplars**

Arthur Wheelock, former curator at the National Gallery of Art in Washington and senior adviser to The Leiden Collection, said that Rembrandt and his contemporaries also made historical scenes relevant to their audience. 'If you wanted to be a great artist [at the time], you had to be a history painter,' he told a press conference.

'Ancient stories are fascinating because they were important for how one is to behave in daily life. These were models for behaviour, positive or negative, exemplars of human life that were important for everyday people to study.'

*The exhibition opens on February 4 and runs until August 27.*